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# Using Social Interaction To Elevate And Enrich Student Expressive Vocabulary In Writing

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USING SOCIAL INTERACTION TO ELEVATE AND ENRICH STUDENT  
EXPRESSIVE VOCABULARY IN WRITING

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for a degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Hamline University

St. Paul, Minnesota

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To my husband, who believed in me, empowered me and supported me through this entire process. Thank you, Cory. I am also grateful to my committee for providing insight and encouragement on this journey. Finally, to my students – past, present and future. You inspire me, shape me and impact me as a teacher, learner and human being.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Vocabulary at the Middle Level

Middle school students have a reputation with language. 6th, 7th and 8th grade hallways are smattered with slang and terminology that can be a foreign language to many adults, and is rapidly evolving. A catch phrase uttered thousands of times one week could easily be antiquated and nearly extinct the next week. The working lexicon of middle level learners is in continuous development, with new terms shifting almost seamlessly from an “I know what this word means when I hear it” level to the “I know this word and could use it in a sentence” level. However, when it comes to academic vocabulary, and the vocabulary curriculum within an English Language Arts classroom, the integration and utilization of rich vocabulary does not occur as seamlessly (or with as much excitement). While informal vocabulary and slang terminology may allow students to keep up with the current trends and prove their status to their peers, developing and maintaining a high level of vocabulary knowledge impacts reading comprehension, effective writing and academic success (Graves, 2006). This capstone explores the question, *How does social interaction in vocabulary instruction impact student vocabulary understanding and usage in writing?* Students need a rich and extensive vocabulary to discuss complex ideas, to communicate effectively through writing and to understand high-level texts. The goal of this capstone is to utilize developmentally appropriate and engaging methods to increase word consciousness, vocabulary acquisition and expressive vocabulary in writing in middle level learners. The significance of rich vocabulary usage in speaking and

writing is evident through my own personal experience with the power of language and through consistent and problematic vocabulary curriculum and learning at the middle level.

### **Becoming Word-Obsessed**

I remember the first time my writing provoked controversy. I was eleven years old, and my subject was King Tut. I heard my parents, who had chosen to homeschool me in elementary school, argue in hushed tones upstairs, “She found it on the Internet, honey, I’m sure -- the vocabulary and syntax... not a single spelling error.” “I think it’s hers... I think she wrote it herself.” My heart leapt into my throat when I heard my dad call me upstairs. He held my report in his hand and gazed down his nose at me, not a glimmer of a pride in sight. I was surprised, apprehensive. I loved learning about this legendary king and all of the mystery that enshrouded his mummified body; I was sure my dad was calling me up to praise my report and ask the in-house expert all about the great and decomposed King Tutankhamun. Now, I am certain that this report was no Pulitzer-worthy piece of investigative journalism, but I was an avid reader, and intentionally sought to emulate the styles that I read. Instead of receiving praise and adulation, I felt suspicion and disappointment emanating from my father’s gaze. “Where did you get this?” he asked. “I wrote it! I read this book on King Tut and...” “Are you sure you didn’t find this somewhere else? Tell me the truth.”

I was bewildered. My father believed that I plagiarized, that I found an essay on King Tut online and slapped my own name on it. However, in that moment, standing there in the dining room, looking up at my father, I had no idea what it meant to copy and paste or to steal another’s work. The only way to get a report on King Tut, I thought, was



to learn about him and write one myself; it was my responsibility to describe and chronicle his life (and death) in all its ancient glory. It took some effort to truly convince my father that I had indeed crafted the King Tut piece myself, but when I did, the suspicion in my dad's eyes transformed into pure excitement.

He launched into full-on journalist coach mode. My father studied journalism at the University of Minnesota, and went on to work as a sports reporter for a few different newspapers, then taught college-level courses and took a writing job on the side. He was a language fanatic, obsessed with the art of the written word. After the King Tut incident, my dad began hovering over my shoulder as I wrote, his fingers jabbing the screen and his pen marking my papers, prompting me to eliminate my lazy verbs, to cut out every personal pronoun, to craft my parallel structure and to truly find my voice as a writer.

I quickly fell in love with words, as well; I became enamored with the potency they held. As I grew older, this love was repeatedly deepened and affirmed. As I read poetry, studied other cultures, dissected classics and discussed philosophy, I became even more convinced that the words that we know and use shape our understanding of the world around us -- they embody our ideas, give us pathways for effective expression and free us to explore and question our surroundings (Graves, 2006; Stahl, 2004). Where our language is limited, so are our ideas.

### **My Professional Experiences with Vocabulary**

As a 7th grade English Language Arts teacher, I far too often catch myself channeling my logophile father. As I pour over my students' writing, I find myself lamenting over their language usage, yearning to find vivid description or powerful wordplay. Riddled with vague words like "bad," "large," "happy" and "things," my

student's writing communicates their ideas using the most basic of vocabularies. My first year of teaching, I thought that hanging a poster that screamed "BANNED BORING WORDS" in the front of my room would surely curb this issue, but the forbidden words continued to plague my students' writing and speaking. My second year of teaching, I continued on my vocabulary tirade, climbing aboard my anti personal-pronoun soapbox and forbidding my students from ever saying, "in my opinion," or "I think," or "I believe" ever again. Your name is on your paper, I'd state, so state your claim like it's true and then back it up with solid reasons and persuasive language. Still, the loathsome phrases continued to invade their writing. Some students would comment in peer conferences, "You better not say, 'I think' here... Mrs. Swenson doesn't like it." However, they did not seem to grasp why. My fingers can type the words almost automatically now, entering yet another comment stating, "banned boring word," or "push yourself with word choice!" or "avoid personal pronouns" or "too vague -- can you find something more descriptive?" Unfortunately, my feedback seems to only be utilized during required revision sessions and not applied to future writing. Even worse, many of my students are aware that their word choice is weak, and some even report to working on it, but it still remains vague, robotic and vanilla. Every so often, when we do a creative writing journal prompt, I hear a few writer's voices poke through, and I begin to see my student's pick up a brush to paint a picture with their words. However, when we go back to academic writing, they revert to their old tendencies. As I was going through one student's essay recently, I noted that her goal in her essay was to use descriptive language in her writing. Knowing that this student has many diligent and eager qualities, and that her goals are consistently meaningful to her, I searched her essay for examples of

powerful, descriptive verbiage. Although I saw some attempts, I was disappointed. This led me to start asking questions. Even if my students wanted to use powerful word choice and descriptive vocabulary in their writing, do they have the tools to do so? In addition, why is it that none of the words we are using in our vocabulary units are seeping into student writing? In an end-of-the-year survey, many students reported that our vocabulary curriculum felt burdensome and irrelevant. This brought me to question our vocabulary instruction, as well. If my students were not using these new vocabulary words in their speaking and writing, what was the point? Was vocabulary instruction purely for the purpose of reading comprehension? Or could it be used for something further?

### **Vocabulary Instruction in 7th Grade English Language Arts**

The school where I work is a diverse public setting with roughly 250 students at each grade level. Since I began teaching there, I've taught three different levels of Language Arts classes: Standard ELA, Intervention ELA and Advanced ELA. The Standard English Language Arts includes students who are proficient readers, as well as students who are partially proficient or not proficient at all. For vocabulary instruction at this level, teachers use a set of Greek and Latin roots, prefixes and suffixes. Students are given a list of ten roots and two academic terms each week. They are expected to memorize the definitions of each term, and be able to identify the root/prefix/suffix within a word on the test. In years past, the tests have consisted only of multiple-choice questions. Last year, 7th grade ELA teachers collaborated to revise tests and incorporate students predicting the meaning of complex vocabulary based on what they know of word roots, prefixes and suffixes (or morphological analysis). While these revisions seemed to enhance student ability to break down words into parts, student word

consciousness – along with their motivation to use new words in context – was still low. I also taught an intervention class our school calls “ELA Extension.” In this program, I used a curriculum where words were chosen out of short stories, and students were to define each word and use it in a sentence. In the Advanced English Language Arts class, which I currently teach, students use a Prestwick House (Osborne, 2008) vocabulary curriculum, which is based on Greek and Latin roots, but centers more on knowing words that contain the roots. Tests are all comprised of multiple-choice questions and measure if the student can select the correct definition for each word. As time went on, I sensed that the vocabulary curriculum at each level seemed disjointed; it was a set of activities we did as a separate segment of class, and it was not connected to anything else. There were no avenues to speak or write these words in meaningful situations, and students saw this vocabulary development as something that was purely tied to an assessment. While students were able to regurgitate definitions, and it likely made an impact on their reading comprehension, they rarely used these words in real life situations, in speaking, or in academic writing assignments. Once or twice during the year, I had students practice their vocabulary words with a creative writing journal prompt. As students read their journal entries aloud, I was startled to discover how few of them could use the word accurately in context and how many of them didn’t even know how to pronounce the word correctly. When it came to vocabulary learning and instruction in my classroom, enthusiasm was low. In course reflections, many students cited how vocabulary was a struggle for them, and how they felt they needed to be more diligent with their workbook homework in order to succeed. Graves (2006) defines “word consciousness” as an “awareness of and interest in words and their meanings... motivation to learn words,

deep and lasting interest in words” (p. 7). I was not seeing this in my classroom. As a lover of language, someone who has experienced the thrill of memorable, evocative diction in my own writing, as well as in the writing of others, this negative perspective toward vocabulary haunts me. If my students see vocabulary as an isolated activity, if they see it as an exercise in rote memorization and clicking the correct bubble, I have done them a disservice.

Elevated and enriched vocabularies enable students to read more complex texts, discuss more complex ideas and write higher-quality arguments, narratives and explanations. Strengthening these skills allows students to be more prepared for the rigor of college-level writing, the demands of a competitive (and often, communication-driven) career world and the challenging dialogue of a globally-minded, fast-paced, ever-changing society.

### **Summary**

Prescribing a list of 15 words and definitions for students to memorize each week is not proving to be effective in enriching student speaking and written expression. Even with daily vocabulary workbook exercises, students are still not embedding new vocabulary words into their writing. In essence, while students may be able to identify the correct definition for a dozen vocabulary words each week, something else needs to happen in order for powerful diction to shape student speaking and writing. In exploring and researching the impact of conversation and student interaction (in conjunction with new vocabulary words) on speaking and writing, I intend to understand how to help my students utilize strong word choice to convey their ideas. In the next chapter, I will outline research-based vocabulary strategies, what former research has shown about the

effects of integrating social interaction into learning, and how vocabulary instruction and writing are tied together.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Overview**

Through vocabulary instruction, teachers seek to not only give students the tools to understand the complexity of language, but also to instill language skills into student speech and writing (expressive vocabulary). While the impact of vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension has been widely studied and researched, the connection between vocabulary instruction and writing proves to be an area with much research still needed. This chapter discusses past research on vocabulary development and instruction, social interaction in learning, and the effects of vocabulary instruction on written expression. Before conducting research on the question “How does social interaction in vocabulary instruction impact students writing?” there are several significant examples of existing research and findings to build upon. This chapter will outline the following areas connected to the research question:

- a. Foundational understanding of vocabulary development
- b. Research-based instructional strategies for vocabulary
- c. How social interaction connects to learning and language
- d. How vocabulary instruction and conversation have impacted writing

If teachers are noting the lack of high level vocabulary in students’ writing, where do students see themselves in terms of writing? Werderich and Armstrong (2013) explored this question and found that student self-perception of their own writing abilities (what they believe about their own writing), is actually quite high. Approximately 80% of middle school students in the study reported that they believed themselves to be average,

good or even excellent writers. Although it appears to slightly decrease from elementary to middle to high school (Pajares, Valiante & Cheong, 2007), a majority of students feel that writing assignments in their English Language Arts classes are “somewhat easy,” with 61% of middle school students in particular resonating with this response (Werderich & Armstrong, 2013). Students involved in the same study also reported a high value of writing, and see writing as a highly relevant and necessary skill in the “real world”; more than 90% of elementary, middle and high school students express that they believe that writing is “very important.” Although the percentage is already high, it steadily increases as students move from middle school to college, indicating that students become more aware of the real-world necessity of strong writing skills. Students clearly see the importance of writing for their future, and they are asking for more tools for improvement. Many participants called for more feedback in their writing, more practice or opportunities to write in school and increased rigor (Werderich & Armstrong, 2013, p. 352).

Unfortunately, this vote of confidence from students does not reflect in high (or even proficient) writing abilities. In fact, according to The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) nation-wide writing assessment, given in 8th and 12th grade, the vast majority of students cannot demonstrate proficient – or basic – writing. The 2011 test revealed that only 27% of students in both grades performed at or above the “proficiency” level in writing (NCES, 2012); elements of the scoring criteria included detail, language and word choice, among other elements. In addition, although students claim to believe that writing is important, their motivation or engagement in writing seems to be lacking. When asked if writing was a fun way to spend time, there were very



low levels of agreement (Werderich & Armstrong, 2013). Witte (2007), a middle school teacher, described a conversation with a student, revolving around his (the student's) writing habits. The student described his investment in a personal blog, but that his blog was online writing, different than school writing. School writing was boring writing.

Students are not showing a fascination and investment in the act of academic writing. In addition, students are yielding low performance on classroom writing tests (Werderich & Armstrong, 2013); student ability to use and understand words in context is not improving over time, while the achievement gap in vocabulary is growing. If students are receiving vocabulary and writing instruction, but are still not effective (or motivated) writers, something needs to change in the classroom.

### **Vocabulary Acquisition and Knowledge**

Before students can effectively utilize new vocabulary in speaking and writing, they must first be exposed to new words. This exposure comes from several avenues, including incidental learning through reading and discussion (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998), and direct, intentional instruction (Anderson & Nagy, 1991).

As a student progresses through his or her school experience, his or her vocabulary expands rapidly. Nagy and Anderson (1982, 1984) found average student vocabularies (in grades 3 to 12) to expand by approximately 3,000 words per year. There are several factors at work in the individual's receptive and expressive vocabulary development. Wasik & Hindman (2015) explain several keys to rich vocabulary acquisition. These interventions include giving students repeated exposure to vocabulary words in meaningful contexts, exposing students to a high density of vocabulary, guiding students to link new vocabulary to personal connections, and providing them with

accessible definitions, pictures and props to aid in memory. Students also need several opportunities to practice and use the words themselves in meaningful ways, with feedback on their usage and pronunciation (Fischer & Frey, 2011).

Student proficiency levels in reading and writing also play a significant role in their abilities to gain understanding of new vocabulary (Dobbs & Kearns, 2016; Perfetti, 2007). Students who read and write at high proficiency levels (as measured by state standardized proficiency tests) are more likely to attempt new words in writing, as well as use them accurately, than their peers of lower reading and writing proficiency levels (Dobbs & Kearns, 2016). These various levels of background knowledge and language understanding can present obstacles and misconceptions in the word-learning process. Anglin (1977) conducted studies that showed children to both “overgeneralize and undergeneralize word meanings” (as cited in Graves, 1986, p.54), one example being assuming the term “dog” applies to all four-legged animals, or that it only applies to certain sizes of canine. This varied according to the child, his or her experiences or exposures to the new word, and the nature of the concept or prior exposures. Carey (1978) discussed the difference between “fast mapping” and “extended mapping”; in fast mapping, children develop a rough estimate of a word’s meaning after only being exposed to it once or twice, whereas extended mapping concerned students who were repeatedly exposed to a new word, gaining instruction regarding the word and fully learning the word (as cited in Graves, 1986, p.55). While individuals broaden their receptive and expressive vocabulary from various sources of input, educators seek to implement focused and intentional vocabulary instruction throughout an individual’s academic career.

**Achievement Gap.** Vocabulary instruction proves to be vital for several reasons, and is an especially important tool for diminishing the Achievement Gap. Certain student populations -- those who grew up in poverty, in environments where there is less verbal interaction or access to English texts, or in homes where English is not the primary language spoken -- are more likely to have a smaller vocabulary than their more advantaged peers. Students in these situations face incredible obstacles in expanding their vocabularies, and therefore struggle with reading comprehension and expression. This gap only widens as students get older; strong readers grow progressively stronger and poor readers fall further behind (Sedita, 2005). Graves (1986) reported that there was a significant disparity between the vocabularies of middle-class students and “disadvantaged” students; “disadvantaged first graders knew about 1,800 of the 5,044 words tested, and the middle-class first graders knew about 2,700 of them” (p.53). This weak vocabulary foundation impedes the academic success of many students. Sternberg (1987) and Terman (1916) asserted that vocabulary knowledge is one of the strongest indicators of verbal ability; in addition, wide vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary instruction has a severe influence on reading comprehension for native English speakers and English language learners alike (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; Carlo et al., 2004). For many of these students, academic struggle and defeat is rooted in a sparse vocabulary bank (Becker, 1977; Biemiller, 1999, as cited in Graves, 2006). Because they lack a substantial foundation in vocabulary, they struggle through challenging texts, and thus tend to avoid reading since it proves laborious and difficult for them (Sedita, 2005). Hence, their literacy levels are slowed because of their reluctance to read. Conversely, students with a sturdy foundation of vocabulary knowledge read more and then further

their reading skill (as well as their knowledge in other content areas) (Sedita, 2005).

Therefore, word work and development of word-consciousness in students of all levels and of all backgrounds buttresses student success and growth as readers and communicators. Research-based vocabulary instructional practices and interventions prove especially vital for students who are found lacking in vocabulary.

**Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge.** Depth of vocabulary knowledge is another important concept to understand and explore in terms vocabulary development. Stahl (2005) asserted that, “vocabulary knowledge is knowledge; the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also implies how that word fits into the world.” When teachers get a sense of student word knowledge, this helps them make mindful decisions about moving forward with instruction. Cronbach (1942) discussed five levels or “dimensions” of vocabulary knowledge: “(1) generalization -- defining the word, (2) application -- selecting situations to which the words is appropriately applied, (3) breadth -- recalling different meanings of the word, (4) precision -- recognizing exactly in what situations the word does and does not apply, and (5) availability -- using the word in discourse” (As cited in Graves, 1986, p. 55). Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) identify five levels, as well:

1. No knowledge
2. General sense, such as knowing mendacious has a negative connotation
3. Narrow, context bound knowledge, such as knowing that a radiant bride is a beautifully smiling happy one, but unable to describe an individual in a different context as radiant

4. Having knowledge of a word but not being able to recall it readily enough to apply it in appropriate situations
5. Rich, decontextualized knowledge of a word's meaning, its relationship to other words, and its extension to metaphorical uses, such as understanding what someone is doing when they are devouring a book (p. 10)

After synthesizing multiple other studies, Graves suggests that utilizing multiple choice assessment tools to measure student understanding of vocabulary is limited in its scope to provide information on a student's level of vocabulary knowledge. For example, is the student able to use the process of elimination to avoid distractors and select the correct answer, or is the word a part of the student's active and expressive vocabulary? (Cronbach, 1943; Curtis, 1986; Dolch & Leads, 1953). When teachers fail to utilize multiple modes of vocabulary assessment, they only grasp a narrow dimension of a student's word understanding. Furthermore, if a teacher perpetuates shallow methods of vocabulary instruction, ignoring a multifaceted approach to vocabulary learning and expression (especially those involving speaking and writing), they foster only shallow levels of understanding. Students are inhibited from delving into a deeper, more extensive understanding of language.

### **Research Based Vocabulary Strategies**

There are several strategies employed by teachers and researchers to explore and develop student vocabulary. Some methods focus more on strategies that students can use to decipher the meaning of new vocabulary words as they encounter them (these include using context clues and teaching students how to analyze the morphology of a word). Other methods focus on teaching a set list of individual words; this may be a list out of a

vocabulary workbook, a list of academic language needed to understand new concepts, or a set of words taught before reading a new book or passage (pre-reading). Overall, the body of research suggests a multi-faceted approach, incorporating several approaches to word learning as a means to deeper word-consciousness.

**Multi-Component Approaches.** Simply having students write down conventional definitions for new vocabulary has proven to be one of the least effective vocabulary-learning strategies (Sedita, 2005; Scott & Nagy, 1997). Instead, a vocabulary program that incorporates multiple components and avenues for learning yields higher gains. Graves (2000) asserts the efficacy of a vocabulary program that emphasizes reading widely, teaching individual vocabulary words, teaching word-learning strategies and promoting word consciousness. Stahl (1999) formed a model that embraces multiple approaches, as well, including definitional and contextual information on each word's meaning, actively involving students in word learning, and providing multiple and meaningful exposures to the word.

**Morphological Analysis.** Vocabulary comprehension and instruction through morphological analysis, which is the study of the roots, prefixes and suffixes that make up words, has also been the subject of several studies. In 1958, a study conducted by Thompson showed that when college students were taught "20 prefixes and 14 roots as part of an efficient reading course," their test scores improved by 34%. In addition, in the subcomponent focusing on identification of word elements, student scores improved by 22%. Graves and Hammond (1980) utilized prefix instruction to seventh graders over just a few days, as well as strategies for using prefixes to determine meaning. The results showed that students who had been taught prefixes did better on a test that required them

to figure out the meanings of new words (which contained the prefixes taught) than students who had not received the prefix instruction. White, Sowell and Yanagihara (1989) followed suit, but integrated more active practice, along with feedback and interaction from the teacher. These students were more successful than the control group receiving traditionally instructed students, as well. Baumann, Edwards, et al. (2003) studied fifth grade students receiving two different vocabulary treatments in their social studies classes. One group participated in contextual and morphological analysis of academic vocabulary, while the other group received traditional vocabulary instruction for the academic vocabulary in their textbooks. The group who received instruction on using context clues to derive meaning and analyzing word parts (morphological analysis) was more successful at determining word meanings on a delayed test.

Despite these successes, Graves (2006), provides cautionary insight when he states that although teaching Greek and Latin word parts (roots, in particular) may be beneficial, there are several obstacles teachers face in using them: there is an expansive array of roots to teach, many of them go unused in English words, sometimes the meaning of the Greek or Latin root and the meaning of the English word that contains it doesn't line up, and the roots often have differing spellings in English words, so students have a harder time decoding them and analyzing them in context.

**Using Context Clues.** Students acquire most of their active vocabularies from hearing or reading the new words in context (Sternberg, 1987), so using context clues as a means of understanding vocabulary also proves an effective strategy. Jenkins and Wysocki (1985) showed that with increased appearances of a word in context comes increased learning and comprehension; it takes five to six contextual presentations to

produce reliable gains on vocabulary measures (Jenkins & Wysocki, 1984). In addition, the “clues” surrounding the unknown word also carry heavy weight; Carroll and Drum (1983) discovered that students were able to produce more accurate definitions for words with better clues surrounding them. However, Graves (1986) states that teaching students to utilize and employ context clues as a strategy for understanding new vocabulary is difficult, and not all attempts at teaching this strategy have proven successful. In addition, leaving all vocabulary learning and instruction up to independent reading and exposure to high level talk, hoping for incidental word learning is risky.

**Individual Vocabulary Learning Strategies.** One approach that steers away from prescribed vocabulary altogether is Ruddel and Shearer’s (2002) Vocabulary Self-Collection Strategy (VSS). In this strategy, which the authors report is supported by social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1986), transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1994) and activity theory (Engestrom, 1996; Tolman, 1999), students self-select words from their reading, from other classes they are in, or from words they have heard in conversation. Students shared their words with their classmates, along with the context of the word. Then, students worked in small groups to come up with a prediction of the definition based on the context, investigated the word, and revised the definition. This gave them several opportunities to engage in peer interaction, or as Rosenblatt (1994) explains, “socially mediated learning experiences” (1083) revolving around new word learning. Ruddel and Shearer (2002) discovered both an increase in student word consciousness and scores on weekly vocabulary tests. While the previous test score average was 76%, after employing VSS, scores rose to an average of 94% (360).



**A Case for Teaching Individual Words.** Even though most of an individual's active vocabulary isn't born out of direct, classroom vocabulary instruction, teaching specific, pre-selected words to students has several benefits. Graves (2006) supports this claim with the following reasons: "teaching a child a word leaves him with one less word to learn independently," teaching individual words gives students the tools to understand and explore his or her surroundings, and pre-teaching words positively impacts the comprehension of reading passages that contain the pre-taught word. Additionally, teaching words increases "the power and overall quality of students' oral and written communication skills" (Graves, 2006). In addition, McGregor, Sheng, and Ball (2007) found that with a higher frequency of exposure to targeted words came a deeper semantic knowledge (or meaning-based understanding). Finally, dedicating time to explore words and their meanings "demonstrates our [teachers or adults] interest in words," and cultivates a value, interest and passion for language in students, as well (p.59).

Although Chesbro (2016) had a prescribed list of words, Chesbro also designed a way to personalize vocabulary instruction and learning in the middle school classroom. Aiming to develop a tool that could be used interdisciplinarily, Chesbro created an organizer that provided a content-specific piece of academic language, along with a definition, and then students would come up with one word that encapsulated the definition (somewhat of a synonym, but more focused on the creating a synonym for the definition than the selected term itself), a symbol that represented the word and a "weird personal connection." This allowed students to create meaningful connections with the academic vocabulary, use the words in context and share experiences with each other. This approach is supported by a social constructivist viewpoint (Vygotsky, 1986).

**Current Practices.** Watts (1995) observed six different elementary classrooms in an urban school to find out how (and why) teachers were actually teaching vocabulary. The study revealed that only 37% of teachers presented the words in context, that few teachers were providing multiple exposures to words, and that most teachers generally connected the vocabulary instruction to a passage that students were about to read. There were minimal findings of teachers guiding the purpose of vocabulary instruction into spoken vocabularies, written expression or any usage that would help students outside of school. Some activities, while proven to increase student knowledge of definitions, do very little to impact student understanding of usage and context; students may know how to regurgitate the definition of a vocabulary term, but not choose to use it in their own speech or writing (Graves, 1986).

### **Conclusions on Vocabulary Methods**

In 1986, Graves set out to analyze, synthesize and evaluate past research on vocabulary acquisition, instruction and strategies for the purpose of helping teachers to build effective vocabulary programs. In evaluating several vocabulary instructional methods, Graves concluding that a mixed-methods approach (activities involving both definitional emphasis with a provided definition, and contextual emphasis, where students have the opportunity to work with the word in context) “produced superior results on all measures,” (Graves, 1986, p. 64); the study also yielded that deep processing of words produced increased comprehension.

Based on years of self-conducted vocabulary research, as well as many meta-analyses of other vocabulary studies, Graves (2006) provides an updated list of general guidelines for effective vocabulary programs. First, the most effective vocabulary

programs include both definitional information and contextual information. Second, students learn vocabulary most effectively through “active and deep processing of the words” (69). Third, students benefit from several exposures to new vocabulary words. Fourth, teachers should provide opportunities for students to see the word in new contexts over time, to review the word, and to continue practicing its usage. Fifth, discussion surrounding the word and its meaning is vital. Last, new vocabulary words demand instructional time. The more time spent actively engaging with each new word gives way to increased understanding.

### **Social Interaction in Learning**

Fosnot states, “We do not act alone; humans are social beings. Throughout our evolution, from the hunter-gatherer days to the technological present, we have sought to establish communities, societies, forms of communication, and thus cultures as an adaptive mechanism” (2005, p. 30). The role of social interaction in learning was developed and explored through Jean Piaget. On a more philosophical level, Piaget held that knowledge had an adaptive quality; individuals make meaning based on the outside environment and outside factors, have experiences internally, and shape knowledge and perceptions. A “cognitive subject” (a person) deals with “previously constructed perceptual and conceptual structures” (Fosnot, 2005). Piaget’s theories evolved into a theoretical umbrella called “constructivism.” Constructivism is a psychological theory of learning that emphasizes how individuals construct meaning and knowledge based on their environment and interactions. Social constructivism, another term used in conjunction with these theories, emphasizes peer and teacher interactions and dialogue. Piaget stated, “There is no longer any need to choose between the primacy of the social

or that of the intellect; the collective intellect is the social equilibrium resulting from the interplay of the operations that enter into all cooperation” (Piaget, 1970, p. 114).

Lev Vygotsky sought to build upon Piaget’s theories, and focused more on the role of dialogue. Vygotsky explored how teacher talk and questions impacted learners, as well as how the conversations and questions between peers impacted learners (Fosnot, 2005). He stated that “the most effective learning occurs when the adult draws the child out to the jointly constructed ‘potential’ level of performance” (Bickmore-Brand & Gawned, 1993, p. 49). In emphasizing the foundational concepts and practicalities of social constructivism within classrooms, Fosnot states:

Dialogue within a community engenders further thinking. The classroom needs to be seen as a ‘community of discourse engaged in activity, reflection, and conversation’ (Fosnot, 1989). The learners (rather than the teacher) are responsible for defending, proving, justifying, and communicating their ideas to the classroom community. Ideas are accepted as truth only insofar as they make sense to the community and thus they rise to the level of ‘taken-as-shared.’ (2005, p. 34)

When Language Arts teachers integrate collaboration, discussion, debate and dialogue -- all heavily social activities -- learners cultivate their language arts skills further. They become higher quality writers, more cognizant readers and more accurate spellers (Graves, 1986). Dialogue in a group leads to development both as individuals and group members (Genishi, McCarrier, & Nussbaum, 1988). “The talking, sharing, and listening that occur(s) pull down the barriers to communication and enhance the child’s literacy growth” (Amarel, 1987, as cited in Fosnot, 2005).

Elementary school teachers Crouse and Davey (1989) explored the results of integrating student collaboration into their classrooms. They saw students learning from one another, discussing writing, building relationships and fostering community among their peers. In terms of writing, students “helped each other make sense of their writing,” offered ideas and helped each other improve as writers.

Cowey, in Fosnot (2005) described instilling constructivist-centered practices into a fifth grade language arts classroom. When students discussed writing with each other, considered audience beforehand and shared their own writing with peers, the language became elevated.

As Wasik & Hindman (2015) state, “conversations are key” (51). McKeown et al. (1985) discovered that more encounters and exposures to new vocabulary terms yielded higher rates of recall. Involving students in vocabulary-centric conversation allows for more encounters with words -- both hearing new words and using them as a speaker -- than direct instruction or lecture. Conversations are most effective when they are an extended and contingent on the vocabulary, and when they take place between the learner and an adult or the learner and a capable peer (Vygotsky, 1986). In a classroom, this might mean that a question is posed by the teacher to the students that requires students to use or respond to the vocabulary word in context; the conversation between students is dependent on understanding of the vocabulary word, and extends the usage of it (For example: “Talk with your partner about a time when you had trouble maintaining your composure.”). Coyne, McCoach, and Kapp (2007) found that vocabulary instruction that included dialogue between teacher and students produced greater growth gains and children utilizing dialogue and interactive activities “maintained word knowledge for six

to eight weeks after instruction” (as cited in Butler et al., 2010). Opening avenues of interaction allows students to discuss precise details, to give feedback on open-ended questions and to work with different definitions.

### **Vocabulary Usage in Writing**

A multitude of studies affirm that pre-teaching complex vocabulary prior to reading a text positively impacts reading comprehension of the text (containing the pretaught words) (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; McKeown, Beck, Omanson & Perfetti, 1983; McKeown, Beck, Omanson, & Pople, 1985, as cited in Graves, 1986). However, how does vocabulary instruction impact the quality of student writing? Scott, Vevea, and Flinspach (2010) assert that when teachers and researchers assess writing, they analyze quality of writing rather than just vocabulary used. However, the vocabulary and word choice used by a speaker or in a text has been shown to affect how listeners and readers perceive the author or speaker. When a speaker or a text employs more in-depth and precise language, audiences judge it as higher quality material (Grobe, 1981; Neilsen & Piche, 1981; Stewart & Leaman, 1983). In addition, according to Bradac, Bowers and Courtright (1982), Bradac, Courtright, Schmidt, and Davies (1976), and Bradac, Davies, Courtright, Desmond and Murdock (1977), the “lexical diversity of a speaker’s vocabulary is directly related to the listeners’ judgments of the speaker’s competence, the speaker’s socioeconomic status, and the effectiveness of the message” (as cited in Graves, 1986, p. 60). Explicitly teaching and practicing lexical complexity in classrooms, therefore, has the opportunity to elevate students, empower them in the real world and incrementally work toward closing the Achievement Gap.

Although research surrounding vocabulary instruction and written expression is still limited in scope, there are a few examples that give direction on effective instructional strategies for elevating word choice in writing. Graves (1986) cited two studies, Wolfe (1975) and Duin and Graves (1987) (which was in press at the time) where vocabulary instruction was tied to student writing. Wolfe (1975) taught his students specific vocabulary, but did not prompt them to use the words in their writing. When he analyzed the group's results (the control group versus the rest of the students), he found that students who had received the vocabulary instruction did not generally use more complex vocabulary in their writing. Duin and Graves (1987) also set out to study if intensive vocabulary instruction and practice would impact student writing. They chose 13 target words on space, and chose three rounds of vocabulary instruction "treatments": intensive vocabulary and writing, intensive vocabulary alone, and traditional vocabulary instruction. In the instructional activities for the first treatment, they employed whole group discussion, tapping into prior knowledge, reading passages where the words were used in context and providing definitions for students. Additional activities were highly interactive and built on social interaction based on the vocabulary words. Certain writing activities were also built into the vocabulary activities, and students were then given opportunities to write using their vocabulary words in context. The next treatment was similar to the last, except the writing portions were cut out. For the last treatment, the teacher still tapped into prior knowledge, gave out the words and worksheets, and had sentence starters where students worked with the words. They also used the dictionary to find definitions of the vocabulary words. The results showed that applying the intensive vocabulary and writing program resulted in significantly higher writing scores and more

targeted vocabulary words used in writing. In addition, 100% of students surveyed in the intensive vocabulary and writing treatment responded that they believed the unit was fun, with 92% of them saying they would like to learn words that way again, and that they feel confident using the words in speaking and in writing. In the group receiving the traditional treatment, only 15% of students responded that the vocabulary unit was fun and 62% thought they could use the words in speaking and writing (Duin & Graves, 1987, p. 326).

Blachowicz, Bates and Cieply (2015) conducted a study where they created a list of target vocabulary, then incorporated them the vocabulary framing process; the framing process was guided by the acronym A-E-I-O-U: Activating and Engaging (tapping into prior knowledge of the words), Interactive Inquiry and Organization (charting learning and evidence), Using (using the chart to aid in speaking and writing with the new vocabulary words). Teachers across several schools used a knowledge rating scale with each term, where students rated their understanding of a word, then engaged in intensive vocabulary framing before, during and after reading. While the process was guided by a frame (similar to a worksheet), the instruction and interactions in class were a vital component to the system. The study revealed that students used more target words in their writing even when unprompted; in some cases, the mean amount of targeted words used in writing was doubled in cases where vocabulary framing was used rather than traditional vocabulary instruction.

## **Conclusion**

Effective vocabulary instruction is founded upon basic tenants of vocabulary acquisition and research-based instructional strategies. There is a plethora of research on



vocabulary instruction and strategies in conjunction with reading comprehension and vocabulary comprehension; there is some research on the connection between vocabulary instruction and student writing. However, there seems to be a gap in the research surrounding how practicing new vocabulary in peer conversations could impact student word choice and usage in writing. In addition, intensive study on middle-level learners in terms of vocabulary instruction and development is also lacking. Chapter three explains how the impact of socially centered and conversational vocabulary instruction on student writing could be explored in an Advanced 7th grade English Language Arts classroom.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

#### Introduction

In Chapter 2, I explored foundational research on vocabulary acquisition, effective vocabulary instruction, the role of social interaction in learning and prior findings on the connection between vocabulary instruction and writing. During the first few months of the 2016-2017 school year, I researched the question *How does social interaction in vocabulary instruction impact student vocabulary understanding and usage in writing?* Chapter three of my capstone outlines and describes the many factors involved in this research. In this chapter, I will describe the context and environment of my research, including the district and school where it is taking place. I will describe the demographics of the participants (my students), as well as the current vocabulary curriculum in place. I will describe the methodology of my research, including strategies and tools being used, methods of assessment and types of data collected.

#### Context

The district I currently teach in reaches several of the northern suburbs of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. Within the district, there are six elementary schools, three middle schools, two high schools, an adult education center and an alternative learning center. There are approximately 10,000 students and 1,400 staff members in the district. I teach and conducted my research at one of the middle schools, which serves students in 6th, 7th and 8th grades. In the 2016-2017 school year, this

school comprised approximately 826 students and approximately 39 teachers. 50 percent of students were male, and 50 percent were female. 41.4 percent of students were eligible to receive free and reduced price lunch (FRL). 8.7 percent of students received Special Education Services, and 4.8 percent received English Language Learner (EL) services. 58 percent of students identified as White, 20.3 percent identified as Black, 12.1 percent identified as Hispanic, 8.8 percent identified as Asian and 0.8% percent identified as Native American/American Indian. Class periods at this school were 48 minutes long. Participants in this study also had daily classroom access to Chromebooks for academic use.

**Participants.** The participants of this study were 7th grade students enrolled in Advanced English Language Arts classes. The demographics of the Advanced ELA 7 classes differed slightly from the general population of the school. In the 2016-17 school year, 60.8 percent identified as female, and 38.4% percent identified as male. 20.8 percent were eligible for free or reduced lunch (FRL) prices. 1.6 percent received Special Education Services, and none received English Learner (EL) services. 71.2 percent of students identified as White, 8.8 percent identified as Black, 12 percent identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 6.4 percent identified as Hispanic and .8 percent identified as Native American/American Indian.

Students qualified for the Advanced Language Arts class for meeting at least two out of three of the following criteria:

- a. Students “Exceed” grade level proficiency standards on the Spring Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) on Reading in 6th

grade, or have a very high (borderline “exceeding”) meeting proficiency score.

- b. Students are in the 88th percentile and above for the Northwest Evaluation Association Measurement of Academic Progress (MAP) Reading test, taken at the end of their 6th grade year.
- c. Students receive recommendation from their 6th grade English Language Arts Teacher in regards to writing and speaking skills.

There was a very small number of students who have been placed in Advanced classes without meeting 2 of the 3 criteria, because of behavior reasons or a strong belief from teachers and support staff that an Advanced ELA environment would be better for the student than the on-grade level environment. It should be noted that this study was conducted with students who are proficient readers.

### **Mixed Methods Approach**

I used a mixed methods approach – both qualitative methods and quantitative methods. Creswell (2014) defines the mixed methods approach as “integrating the two forms of data, using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks” (p. 4). This methodology originated in the late 1980s to the early 1990s, and it is used heavily in the social and health sciences. One of the primary strengths of the mixed methods approach is that it includes individual voices and perspectives throughout the data collection -- this allows the researcher to enhance his or her understanding of the results. I had access to both quantitative data and qualitative data in this study, which can prove both a strength and a challenge. Creswell (2014) states that a mixed methods approach “provides a more complete understanding of a

research problem than either approach alone” (4). This is a strength of the approach, but it also presents a challenge, because it is a time-intensive and complex endeavor to analyze individual voices and perspectives (especially in terms of writing), compare them to each other and to the quantitative data, and then to draw conclusions from their combination. Both forms are absolutely necessary in understanding the role of social interaction in vocabulary instruction and learning.

I needed to pre-assess vocabulary knowledge and measure change in achievement using the same quantitative tools. However, it was also important to observe and document the process of the vocabulary learning and activities, especially when it concerns conversations between peers (qualitative data). The study would miss the complexities of students as human individuals if student voices and perspectives were not acknowledged through qualitative data, and yet would be very vulnerable to bias and conjecture without the reliability of quantitative tools.

**Quantitative Methods.** One primary means of gathering achievement data was through unit vocabulary tests (Appendix A); the structure and composition of these tests remained consistent (multiple choice, memorization of roots and essay). This allowed me to check the reliability of the tool as I used it again over time, and across different groups. I measured student comprehension of new vocabulary through a multiple-choice section (which included the definitions as options), and through a written component at the end of each test. In this written component, students were required to choose 5 of the 11-12 vocabulary words to use in context. They were given a story or journal prompt to use, or will be allowed to write an original piece. They also had the option to write 5 separate sentences rather than a cohesive paragraph. Measuring student scores on written pieces

quantitatively allowed me to see if there was an impact on achievement because of the treatment being applied in each group.

**Qualitative Methods.** I also measured student attitudes toward vocabulary instruction, and I made observations of the conversations that happened during vocabulary instruction and practice through a teacher observation journal (Appendix B). This observation and documentation allowed me to evaluate and assess student engagement and motivation in the vocabulary activities. The attitude survey pre-assessment (Appendix C) included opinion-based statements with responses measured with a Likert scale (with options including “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree,” and the post attitude survey the same elements, with two additional questions (Appendix D). A second part of the vocabulary attitudes survey, which was a vocabulary questionnaire (Appendix E) included open-ended questions that gleaned student opinions and comments on vocabulary instruction, motivation and writing. This questionnaire also aimed to collect data on student attitudes toward word learning, but gave students the avenue to provide “individual meaning,” (Creswell, 2014, p.4). Including these qualitative elements provided more space for me to ask questions and start forming conclusions based on the anecdotal evidence, observations and student feedback, allowing me to explore the social and interactive nature of this research.

### **Interventions, Implementation and Timeline**

In order to assess baseline comprehension of vocabulary words before instruction, I gave all students a vocabulary pretest that measured word knowledge of all units in the curriculum, but I specifically analyzed achievement (comprehension) of the words from the first four units; this pretest was multiple-choice. Before instruction began, I gave an

attitudes survey, which measured students' perceptions of vocabulary instruction, measured student self-assessment of vocabulary usage, and their confidence and enjoyment in word learning.

The vocabulary attitudes pre-assessment (Appendix C) asked the following questions, which are structured in Likert-like structure, based on a scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”:

1. I enjoy learning new words.
2. I use a rich vocabulary in my writing.
3. I use a rich vocabulary in my speaking.
4. I make an effort to use new vocabulary words in context (in speaking or in writing)

For all students, I used our school's vocabulary curriculum for advanced track ELA classes. The curriculum that 7th grade Advanced ELA uses is *Vocabulary From Latin and Greek Roots: A Study of Word Families, Book II* (8th grade level), published by Prestwick House (Osborne, 2008). This program incorporates Greek and Latin roots words, prefixes and suffixes and provides word families that match up with the roots. Typically, there are 3-4 roots and 11-14 words per unit.

While all students used this book to some extent, and were tested on the same words with the same assessment tool, I applied a different vocabulary instruction treatment to each of my four classes, for a total of four different instructional treatments (one standing as the traditional vocabulary exercises alone, which served as my control group). This model was comparable to the treatments applied by Duin and Graves (1987). Each class had similar demographics and reading levels, but I had each section start the

vocabulary program with common traditional instruction so as to measure and evaluate class averages on test scores without any additional treatments. This provided me with a vocabulary instruction control level for each different group prior to the application of the treatments. The four different treatments were as follows:

Group A: Traditional vocabulary instruction. This group received traditional vocabulary instruction, with six workbook exercises (written) completed in class (one each day) and a brief amount of time to study in class before the test. At the end of a 7 day period, students took the multiple choice unit test along with the written component.

Group B: Socially interactive vocabulary instruction. This group completed each of the six workbook exercises in class (one each day), but also discussed exercises with a partner and participated in conversation prompts using the vocabulary words (Appendix F). Students also had a brief amount of time to study in class before the test, and were prompted to talk and study with a classmate. At the end of a 7 day period, students took the multiple choice unit test along with the written component.

Group C: Socially interactive vocabulary instruction plus writing practice. This group completed each of the six workbook exercises in class, participated in conversation prompts using the vocabulary words, and also had the opportunity to answer creative writing and journal prompts incorporating vocabulary words into their writing prior to the test (Appendix F). Students had a brief amount of time to study in class before the test, talk and practice writing before the test. At the end of a 7 day period, students took the multiple choice unit test along with the written component.

Group D: Traditional vocabulary instruction plus writing. This group received traditional vocabulary instruction, with six workbook exercises (written) completed in



class (one each day), and also had the opportunity to answer creative writing and journal prompts incorporating vocabulary words into their writing prior to the test. Students also had a brief amount of time to study in class before the test, with an opportunity to practice writing with the vocabulary, as well. At the end of a 7 day period, students took the multiple choice unit test along with the written component.

Students in all 4 groups took the unit 1 test after traditional instruction and no additional treatments. Tests for units 2, 3 and 4 were given as the treatments were being applied. After the four tests were given, students took a post-survey of attitudes toward vocabulary learning. All words tested can be found in Appendix J. The post-survey will emulate the pre-assessment form, but have a few added questions. It will also use the Likert scale in answers. The following questions will be on the post-evaluation:

1. I enjoy learning new words.
2. I use a rich vocabulary in my writing.
3. I use a rich vocabulary in my speaking.
4. I make an effort to use new vocabulary words in context (in speaking or in writing)
5. The vocabulary activities we did in class were helpful for me.
6. I would like to continue learning and practicing vocabulary in this way.

At the conclusion of my research study, I applied a common treatment and vocabulary program to all students as to ensure equitable instruction for my students.

### **Duration of Study**

The research will take place from October, 2016 to February, 2017. The vocabulary pre-assessment, the pre-attitudes survey and the first unit test was given

during the first quarter of the school year. After the first vocabulary test, the treatment was applied and students took the unit assessments once every seven school days (for example, if the first test was given on a Monday, students had the following Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday for vocabulary instruction, and the test was given on Thursday -- 7 school days after the previous test). An example of the schedule and routines can be found in Appendix G. The unit tests concluded in December of 2016 and the post-attitudes surveys were completed by February of 2017.

### **Theoretical Perspective: Underlying Paradigms**

The researcher holds loosely to two research paradigms; Creswell (2014) borrows a definition from Guba (1990, p.17) for the term worldview, which is defined as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action.” First, the paradigm of post-positivism shapes many elements of the research and methodology, as it assumed that the data and evidence gathered through the experiment or research study actually shape new hypothesis, conclusions and understanding. However, according to this paradigm, objectivity is absolutely essential in determining causal or correlative relationships. In addition, the paradigm of social constructivism contributes to the dynamic of my research; a significant portion of this research relies on observations and processes of interaction between peers, or interaction between student and teacher. The theory was primarily developed by Jean Piaget, and then later built upon by Lev Vygotsky; it was developed to study the learning experience, and how humans learn through their environment, through social interaction and through their own prior experiences or perceptions. This theory indicates that learning is an interactive and highly social process, where transactions

occur between the learner, the task, peers, teachers and even preconceptions held by the learner. As applied to my study, this theory holds that I could expect my independent variable, social interaction in vocabulary instruction, to influence or explain the dependent variable, vocabulary usage in student writing, because integrating opportunities for social interaction and collaboration around a task should lead to deeper understanding of the task (Creswell, 2014, p. 61). Crotty (1998, as cited in Creswell, 2014) identified a few key constructivist assumptions, stating that humans make meaning through engaging both with the world through social interaction, and that humans bring their own “historical and social perspectives” into their construction of new learning.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed formative data (often during daily vocabulary exercises and activities) in a teacher journal each week, and thoroughly analyzed summative data at the end of each unit. I recorded class averages for scores, as well as individual scores. With each test, I broke the score into two parts: the overall test grade (knowledge of vocabulary meaning/definition) and usage in writing (the writing portion alone, graded out of five points). I logged these scores as well, separately, in order to track the impact of the vocabulary treatments on student writing. I kept track of these scores, as well as observational data (including how many students chose to write in paragraphs, and how many students felt confident about using the words) for each class, in a data-tracking table. In addition, I used this data table to analyze and look for themes in student surveys at the end of the 4 vocabulary units. These themes, along with student feedback on the open-ended vocabulary attitudes questionnaire informed my conclusions.

### **Ethics**

In light of ethical treatment in research, especially research that involves minors as participants, I adhered to all of the guidelines set forth by the Hamline School of Education Human Subject Committee (HSEHSC). I submitted my proposal to the Hamline University Institutional Review Board, then conducted my proposal meeting with my committee. Once my proposal was approved, I completed and submitted the Human Subject Committee application to gain approval. Once the application was approved, I sent out consent forms to my building principal (Appendix H), and students and parents (Appendix I) informing them of the research and asking for their consent. I only used data from parents who gave consent for their children to participate; in addition, students and parents had the freedom to opt out of the experimental treatments and only participate in traditional vocabulary instruction and exercises (completing the workbook activities independently) at any time, and would also not be required to participate in the pre and post vocabulary survey. However, all students took part in the vocabulary pretest, vocabulary instruction and weekly vocabulary unit tests (including a writing component), as this was a component of the English Language Arts 7 curriculum at my school and addresses Common Core Standards for English Language Arts in 7th grade. In the production of data and reports, student names and identifying information were omitted to honor confidentiality.

### **Summary**

This chapter addressed the setting and context of my study, as well as outlining the demographics and characteristics of the participants. It identified and described the timeline of the study and the research methods being used, as well as stating the tools for gathering data throughout the research period. In addition, I described some of the

theoretical underpinnings and paradigms influencing my approach and methods. Lastly, I delineated the ethical process with the HSEHSC prior to starting my research, and then described how the data would be analyzed in order to gain insight to how social interaction in vocabulary instruction impacts student word choice in writing. Chapter four will discuss my research findings, results and any limitations of my study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### Introduction

In chapter four, I describe my findings and results of my research on my essential question, *How does social interaction in vocabulary instruction impact student vocabulary understanding and usage in writing?* The exploration of this question took place through four different instructional groups, each receiving a different treatment of vocabulary instruction and practice. Group A utilized the Prestick House vocabulary workbook only, completing one exercise daily in class. Group B completed the workbook activities in class, but also verbally responded to vocabulary-based discussion questions with various partners two days per vocabulary cycle. Group C completed the workbook activities, discussion questions (one day per cycle) and a vocabulary-based writing prompt once per cycle. Finally, Group D completed the workbook activities and engaged in a vocabulary-based writing prompt once per cycle.

In this section, I outline the results of the data, both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data shows how student knowledge of new vocabulary was impacted throughout the study; this included their definitional knowledge of the word as well as their contextual usage of the word through writing. Through the quantitative means, I was able to assess and analyze whether or not student discussion with and about vocabulary words impacted their achievement levels. In this chapter, qualitative data will also show how student motivation, attitude and willingness to embed new vocabulary in context could be impacted by discussion (and other vocabulary instructional strategies). Lastly,

this chapter analyzes the themes and patterns emerging from the data collected, and then connects the emerging themes to concepts from the literature review in chapter two.

### **Results of the Data**

At the beginning of my study, I implemented two assessments as a baseline for knowing where my students might be with their vocabulary knowledge and current levels of motivation. First, I gave a multiple-choice pretest that assessed student prior knowledge on the words on their upcoming vocabulary units. Students were told to show what they knew on this test, and that this test would not affect their class grade. Second, I had my students take a survey regarding their attitudes toward vocabulary learning, their view of diction in their speech and writing, and their efforts to integrate new vocabulary words into their speech and writing (Appendix C).

The first week of our vocabulary program, I did not apply any vocabulary treatments besides the traditional treatment. I introduced a new set of vocabulary words (Unit 1 in our workbook) and then provided time each day for students to work on the vocabulary exercises in their workbooks. I gave one day for review before the test, and then guided students through the new test format on the day of the assessment. This assessment (Appendix A), like each one to follow, was comprised of a multiple choice section containing the new terms and their definitions, a section where students needed to write down the meanings of Greek or Latin roots (from memory) and a writing component, where students needed to choose five of their vocabulary words to use in context (in a paragraph or in discrete sentences).

After the first week, I began applying the different vocabulary treatments and instructional strategies. I continued to provide time in class for students to work on the

workbook exercises, but the treatments were added into class, as well. At the end of the four-unit study, students took a post-attitudes survey (Appendix D) very similar to the initial attitudes survey. Finally, after compiling the data, analyzing it and being left with several questions regarding student vocabulary motivation, I gave a second survey with open-ended options (Appendix E) for students to describe their thoughts and ideas regarding vocabulary learning and integration into writing. This allowed me to gain student insight and perspective into their own ideas on what motivates them, their own perceptions of obstacles in their way, and their own preferences with word learning at school. Lastly, this mixed-methods approach allowed me to study the impact of discussion on student vocabulary in writing, and also the impact of these strategies on developing an authentic enjoyment of word learning.

### **Quantitative Data**

**Background knowledge: Vocabulary Pretest.** Prior to beginning instruction on vocabulary, students took a pre-assessment measuring student knowledge of the vocabulary words in units 1-4 of their vocabulary curriculum. The average score for all students taking this pre-assessment was 52.6%; this means that before instruction, students were not proficient in almost half of these terms. Since this pretest measured only definition knowledge (lexical understanding); student ability to actually use each word in the correct context (semantic understanding) was not pre-assessed, as this would require students to use 44 unfamiliar vocabulary words in context. I also could not control for word learning that happened outside of my class or incidentally in this ten-week timespan. However, this pretest affirmed that students did not have solid mastery of a significant portion of the words on their unit tests. Student pre-assessment results can



be found in Table 1 below, arranged by treatment group (the treatment not yet having been applied at the time of the pretest).

Table 1:

*Mean Vocabulary Pre-Assessment Scores by Group*

Group	Group A (traditional)	Group B (discussion)	Group C (discussion and writing)	Group D (Writing)
Average pre-assessment score	54.2%.	46.8%	53.6%	55.3%.

The group with the highest level of background knowledge prior to any sort of instruction was Group D, the group that was to receive the writing-based vocabulary treatment. The group that had the lowest level of background knowledge prior to any sort of instruction was Group B, the group that was to receive the discussion-based vocabulary treatment. It is important to note that, besides Group B, the other three classes fell within a 1.7% difference of each other. It is also significant that while Group B achieved averages of almost 9% less than the group with the strongest background knowledge, the group did not maintain this significant gap in achievement after the treatments began; rather, this gap was almost consistently eliminated.

**Unit Tests.** Each week, I assessed student vocabulary knowledge and skill level through a unit assessment. In years prior to this study, the assessments were comprised solely of multiple-choice questions where students would match each term to its definition. For this study, I revised the assessments so that they had a multiple-choice component measuring lexical knowledge, a component requiring memorization of Greek or Latin roots (which connected to the set of vocabulary words in the unit) and a writing

component, which measured semantic understanding. I wanted to see if students definitional knowledge (their lexical understanding of new vocabulary) was transferring to their contextual knowledge (semantic understanding); with this revised assessment, not only were students being asked if they knew the definitions of a set list of words, they were also required to use these words in “meaningful context” (sentences using the words or full paragraphs using the words) (Stahl, 2003). I recorded test results overall (including their knowledge of terms and definitions) and also analyzed results from the writing component separately.

Test 1 was the very first unit of vocabulary in our curriculum for the 2016-17 school year. At the beginning of the unit, I read through unit 1 words and definitions with the students as they highlighted the words in their individual workbooks. Each day, I gave students 5-8 minutes to complete the vocabulary exercise for the day. We had one review day prior to the test, where students were allowed to review the words in whatever way they wished. I noticed that some made flashcards and others quizzed with a partner, but a majority of the students read and reviewed the words silently from their workbooks. While the energy and engagement in the activities throughout the week seemed low to me, the test results were high. When I saw the results, I wondered about a few different pieces. Were the results high because students already knew more of these words than words from other units? Were they high because of the fact that vocabulary quizzes had not yet become routine? Had more of them studied at home because they didn’t know the test set-up or the level of rigor yet? However, analyzing these high averages (even without intensive interventions) confirmed past research on proficient reading levels. High levels of competency in reading and writing positively impact student ability to

learn new vocabulary (Dobbs & Kearns, 2016; Perfetti, 2007). All test averages reflected strong growth in knowledge of the words and a general understanding of the definition, which is the first dimension of vocabulary knowledge (Cronback, 1942). However, although all groups achieved at high levels, there were still differences to notice and analyze.

Table 2:

*Vocabulary unit assessment mean scores over time*

	Group A (traditional)	Group B (+discussion)	Group C (+discussion/writing)	Group D (+writing)
Definitions Pre-test	54.2%	46.8%	53.6%	55.3%
Unit 1 Test (no treatment)	94.2%	91.3%	95.2%	94.2%
Unit 2 Test (treatment)	89.9%	88.4%	89.1%	88.2%
Unit 3 Test (treatment)	95.5%	95.5%	95%	95.3%
Unit 4 Test (treatment)	91.9%	92.4%	96.7%	94.1%

Background knowledge seemed to make a remarkable impact on the first test. However, after the first unit, and after the different instructional treatments were applied, initial differences in background knowledge did not seem to make as much of a difference in assessment results. For example, Group D started with the strongest overall background knowledge of the terms being assessed. However, when it came to test results, this group was not consistently the highest performing of the four groups. The differing instructional treatments applied during units two, three and four seemed to have more influence on achievement than initial background knowledge.

The first unit assessment, which all students took after working with just the workbook exercises and no additional treatments, the group with the lowest scores on the pre-assessment (group B) also yielded the lowest test average. Without any additional vocabulary techniques, this group was still behind the other groups. However, after participating in discussion activities in addition to their workbook exercise, Group B never again yielded the lowest average on any assessment; the intensive strategies buttressed their vocabulary gains. This confirmed the research of Ruddel and Shearer (2002). I set out to research if discussion impacts student vocabulary usage in writing; this data set suggests that utilizing discussion in word learning yields higher gains (in terms of lexical understanding and semantic understanding grouped together) than solely relying on workbook exercises alone.

It should again be noted that all groups yielded high test results overall, with or without additional instructional treatments. In analyzing overall performance, no instructional method proved to yield consistently higher scores. No group outperformed any of the other groups on each unit assessment, perhaps suggesting that one specific strategy does not necessarily outweigh another in efficacy, but rather that all in-class strategies positively impact student gains at some capacity, especially when students are already proficient readers.

The high gains may also point to an effective curriculum already in place. In order for word meanings to stay with students, teachers should provide students with multiple modes of contact with the words, including discussion, analysis of synonyms and antonyms, breakdown of morphological components and practice with usage (Sedita, 2005). The curriculum in use for 7<sup>th</sup> grade employs most of these strategies, except for

discussion. It builds on Greek and Latin root words, provides synonyms and antonyms when possible, and gives several opportunities for students to work with sentence starters using words from the word list. The consistent high average scores on each quiz (across each grouping) may be related to the efficacy of the curriculum already in place.

However, this overall analysis placed heavy emphasis on student ability to work with terms and definitions, possibly giving advantage to students who are able to memorize quickly and easily. Different and intriguing patterns emerged when I broke the test down and analyzed the writing portion.

On two out of three tests after instructional treatments, both groups receiving instructional strategies and practice in using new vocabulary in writing showed higher test averages than the groups without the writing practice. This confirmed research done by Duin and Graves (1987), which showed that students discussing and writing using selected vocabulary words in intensive study before an assessment outperformed those who did not utilize these strategies. One curious set of data was that of the unit three assessments; I did notice that both groups C and D, who utilized a common writing prompt during the vocabulary cycle, performed slightly lower than the other two groups. This made me wonder if the writing prompt was problematic, and when students read their story responses to one another they heard the vocabulary words used several times incorrectly. Struggling with the word through a writing prompt before and not receiving accurate feedback on their writing may have lead students to make similar mistakes in usage on the test.

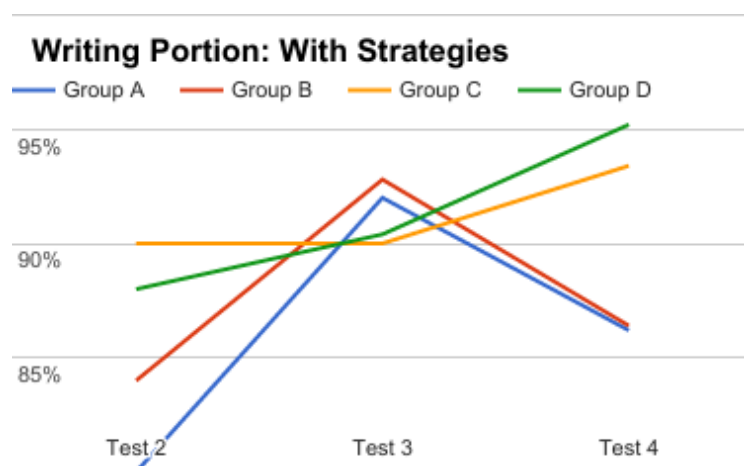
In terms of growth from pre-assessment of word knowledge to the writing section of the unit tests, Group B (discussion-based treatment) consistently made the most

growth out of all of the groups. This same group of students who engaged in the discussion treatment (Group B) consistently outperformed the students receiving only traditional instruction, even if the difference was only slight. In fact, Group B started off with a more limited background knowledge on the vocabulary words, so their gains are higher than the traditional group, as well.

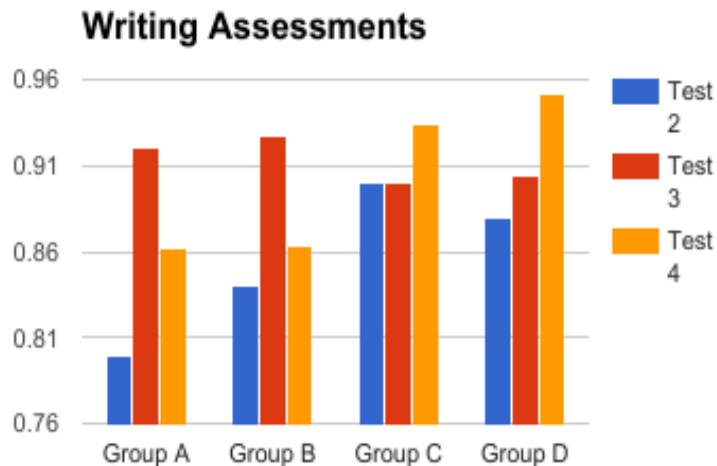
Table 3:

*Vocabulary Unit Assessment Writing Portion Mean Scores Over Time*

	Group A (traditional)	Group B (+discussion)	Group C (+discussion/writing)	Group D (+writing)
Definitions Pre-test	54.2%	46.8%	53.6%	55.3%
Unit 1 Test (no treatment)	86%	88.4%	92.2%	88%
Unit 2 Test (treatment)	80%	84%	90%	88%
Unit 3 Test (treatment)	92%	92.8%	90%	90.4%
Unit 4 Test (treatment)	86.2%	86.4%	93.2%	95.2%



*Figure 1: Vocabulary assessment mean scores on writing portion, after treatments*



*Figure 2: Vocabulary assessment mean scores on writing portion, after treatments*

While this set of data informed me somewhat on what exercises supported student growth, I still felt that I could learn more from the data than just what I saw in achievement levels. I wanted to see not only how students performed, but also how the choices they made in writing might impact the outcome, or what these choices would tell me about student motivation to work with new words.

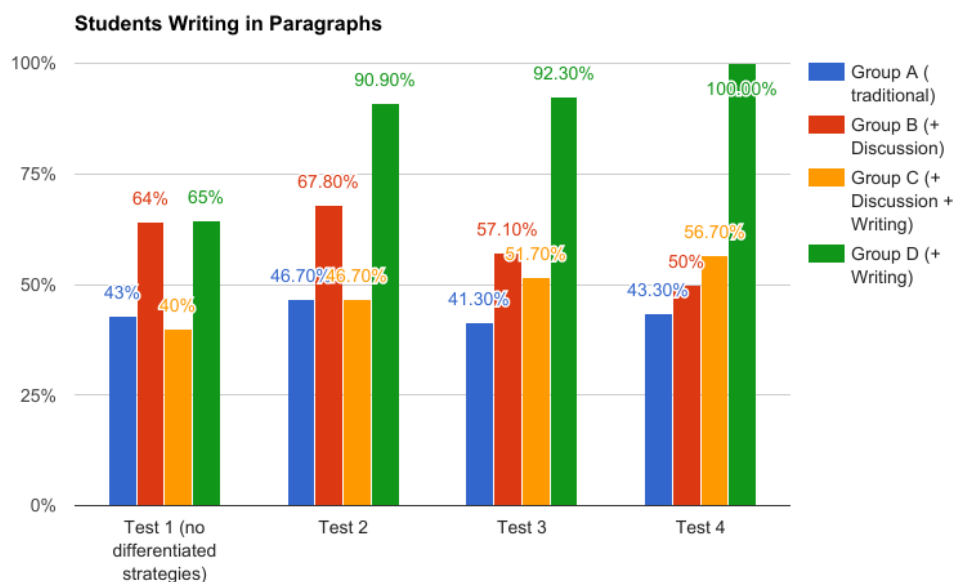
To delve deeper into student motivation in writing, I decided to start measuring how many students were choosing to write in full, cohesive paragraphs (either answering the prompt I provided or coming up with their own piece of creative writing) rather than discrete sentences which did not fit together as a whole. Several studies indicate a link between the longer length of writing and higher quality ratings in writing (Olinghouse & Leaird, 2008). Students writing in full paragraphs are more likely to have high quality rankings than those with sparse or short pieces of writing; vocabulary diversity and word choice is also a component of this same writing quality scale. Therefore, students choosing to write longer pieces are more likely to be higher quality writers.

**Taking Risks in Writing.** When I first administered the tests, I told students that they could choose to either use the new vocabulary terms in 5 separate sentences (unrelated in context) or they could write one coherent paragraph, using the vocabulary words in context of a bigger story or idea. If students chose to write in a paragraph, they could write using a teacher-provided writing prompt (which I created with the vocabulary words in mind), or they could write their own original piece. I started tracking the number of students choosing to write in paragraph form rather than discrete sentences. If students are more likely to implement new vocabulary words in the context of a cohesive paragraph (rather than random sentences), I wondered, are they also more likely to try out new vocabulary in their own original writing -- in class essays, presentations, projects or creative writing? Students writing only in separate sentences could possibly be assuming that they could only use the new words in specific sentences or contexts (especially in ones they had seen before, perhaps in the workbook). They may not attempt to extend their understanding to a new context in fear of misusing the word, but instead rely on the context or sentence to which they were previously exposed.

In analyzing this data, I made several observations. Group A, receiving only traditional vocabulary instruction and practice with the Prestwick House (Osborne, 2008) workbook, started and ended with approximately the same number of students choosing to write in full, extended paragraphs (a minority of students; approximately 40%). This was interesting to me; while this group continued to earn high test scores (sometimes higher than other groups), they seemed less likely to take risks in trying out the new words in a context more extensive than just a single sentence. This made me question if they viewed the writing component of the vocabulary assessment as just another hoop to



jump through, or if they truly did not feel confident using the words fluently. Did they just want to check the vocabulary word and sentence off their list rather than explore creative usage of the word in context?



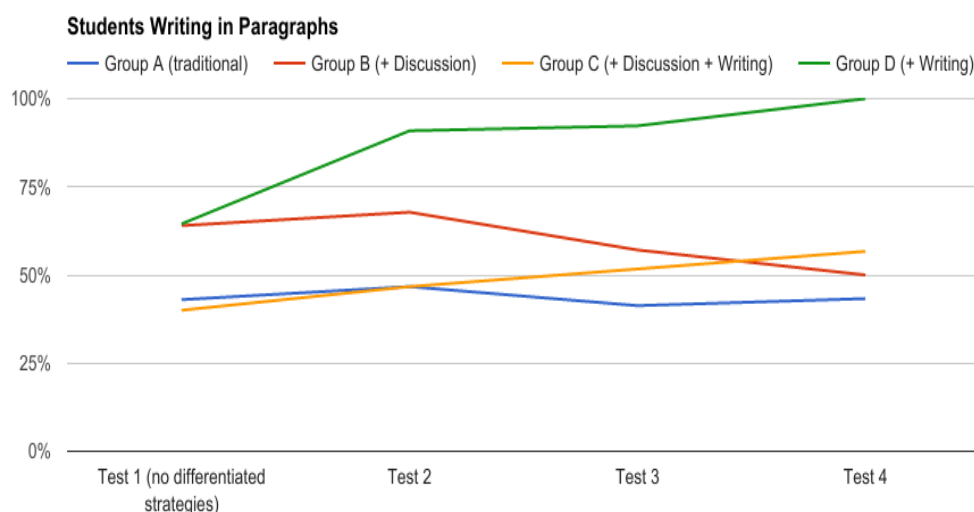
*Figure 3: Students choosing to write in paragraphs, with percentages*

The results of Group B, the students who utilized the discussion prompts each week, surprised me. Although they had a slight rise in students writing in paragraph form after the first week of differentiated vocabulary instruction, fewer and fewer of them attempted to use the words in the context of a paragraph. I wondered if, after trying the new words out in front of their peers and feeling insecure about utilizing the vocabulary words in context (especially if they were unsure of their accuracy), they were less likely to take risks in using the words in writing. This was the only group that ended the set of tests with a lower percentage choosing paragraphs than their starting point.

Group C, utilizing the discussion prompts and the journal entries, started with the lowest percentage of students choosing paragraphs in comparison to the rest of the

groups, but the amount of students willing to try out their vocabulary words in context steadily grew each week, never dipping at any point. Since these students were becoming more familiar with the process of using new words in context (both in speaking and in writing), was their fear of incorrectly using the words decreasing? In noting that this group continued to rise in their usage of words in a paragraph context, but did not consistently yield the highest test scores, I hypothesized that the students were still making errors in the usage of the new words, but were willing to take the risk and attempt to use them.

Similar to Group C, the group utilizing a journal prompt during the vocabulary cycle (Group D), also steadily increased as they moved forward with each unit test, ending with 100% of students choosing to attempt the incorporation of new vocabulary words into a paragraph context.



*Figure 4: Students choosing to write in paragraphs: growth*

As the purpose of this study was to investigate whether or not discussion in class would impact student usage of new vocabulary in writing, this analysis of student writing seems to suggest that discussing words and then requiring students to use them has an adverse affect on student motivation to integrate new vocabulary into extended pieces of writing.

Did students become more conscious that they did not fully understand the context of the word when they discussed it with a partner, and therefore, feel uncomfortable working the new terms into longer pieces of writing? Did the order of the vocabulary strategies impact the outcomes on their tests? While I attempted to interpret the rationale behind student choices in vocabulary usage and draw conclusions about their confidence levels, I felt I still needed something more: what were my students actually feeling about these words? Were they confident in their knowledge? Where they confident in their abilities?

### **Qualitative Data**

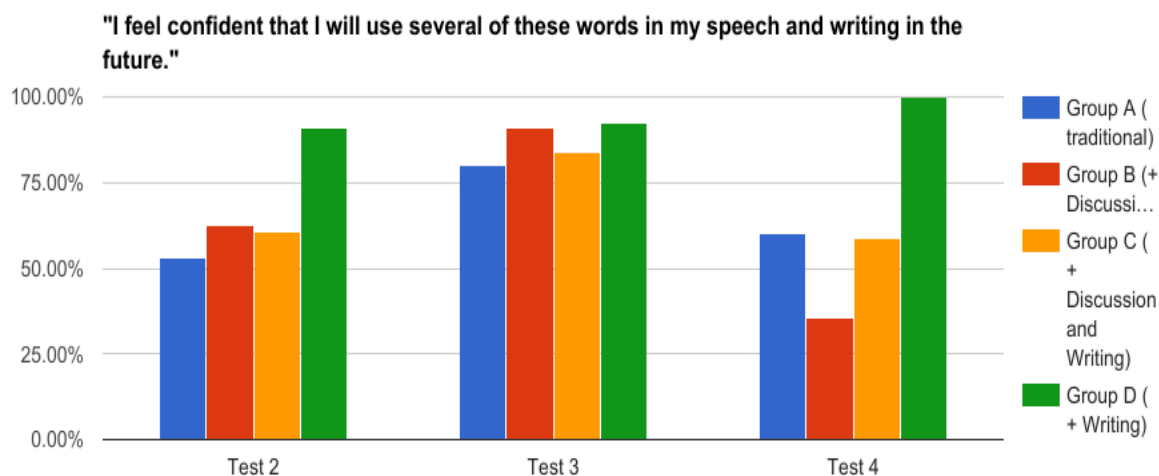
**Observations Through Journaling.** When I first handed out vocabulary books and started unit one, I started just with the traditional vocabulary process for all students. During this process, I took several notes on what I observed. The first day of the program, as I introduced the new words to them and gave them time to complete exercise one, I noticed that work time was completely quiet. I didn't tell students to work individually, but I also didn't tell them not to talk. I did this purposefully; just stating that everyone had about 8 minutes of work time to work on exercise one. No one even tried to talk to or collaborate with the people next to them. Energy seemed considerably low. Only one class (the class that would be group C) asked several questions about the words

(how to pronounce them, if their usage was correct, etc.). The next few days, I explicitly gave them permission (even encouraging them) to work with a partner to complete their vocabulary exercises, but still found that students chose to work independently and silently. Even the one class that had asked questions stopped asking for any other feedback after the first day. The day before the quiz, I played a review game with each class. The game was set up like a competition and worked solely with the new terms and their definitions. Typically, my students love competitive games (as shown through the vocabulary questionnaire results) and a majority of them participate. The game was set up so that I would say the definition, and the first student to know the word would stand up and say it (I also did this reversing the term and definition, so that students would be responsible for the definition). Class after class, very few students knew the definitions. The same 5-6 students (out of 28-30 students) were standing up to guess the words. The rest of the students looked around helplessly. Throughout the day, students would mumble, “I really need to study” or “I don’t know any of these words.” How could this be, when I had given students time in class every day to complete the vocabulary exercises? After looking back on the test results for unit one (which resulted in generally high rates of proficiency), this made me wonder if my students were not actually investing in the workbook exercises, but merely completing them, and then “cramming” with flashcards the night before the unit test.

**Student Confidence in Using New Vocabulary.** After the first unit test, I added an additional (ungraded) question that I hoped would measure student self-reported confidence as we moved through each unit; students could circle “agree” or “disagree” to the statement, “I feel confident that I will use these words in my speech or writing in the

future.” These results were not fully conclusive, and left me with several questions regarding the variables affecting student confidence levels.

The group receiving only traditional instruction (Group A), started off at nearly 53% feeling confident, rose to 80%, then dropped back down to 60%. This group was reported the lowest amount of confidence for two out of the three tests; and this group was also the group that had very minimal practice incorporating these new vocabulary words into their speaking or authentic writing. Group B, actually practicing using the words in the speech throughout, started off at nearly 63%, rose to nearly 91%, then dropped to nearly 36% on one unit. This low percentage made me wonder if they realized how difficult it was for them to use the words when they actually attempted them in our discussion activity. These words had a religious theme to them (polytheistic, deify, sanctum), and there were several usage errors in all four groups as they tried to incorporate the words into their writing.



*Figure 5: Student confidence in using vocabulary words in speech and writing*

Group C, practicing the words both in their speaking and their writing throughout the week, started at nearly 61%, rose to 84%, then dropped down to 58.6% for the unit 4 test. Group D, the group practicing the words in writing, was the only group to consistently increase; they went from 90% of students feeling confident, to 92.3%, to 100% of students feeling confident about the words on the unit 4 test. These students practiced utilizing the words in the writing – which may have contributed to their steady increase in confidence – but they never had the chance to use the words in their speaking.

Both groups that attempted using the unit 4 words in their speaking during the unit showed significant decreases in confidence, falling below the other two groups in their positive responses for unit four; this data seems to imply the effects of actually attempting the words verbally (especially early on in the learning process, and with peers) could be detrimental to student reported confidence levels.

**Attitudes Survey (Pre-test).** Prior to the varied instructional treatments, students took a survey regarding their attitudes in word learning. The questions were as follows; a Likert scale response was provided for each question:

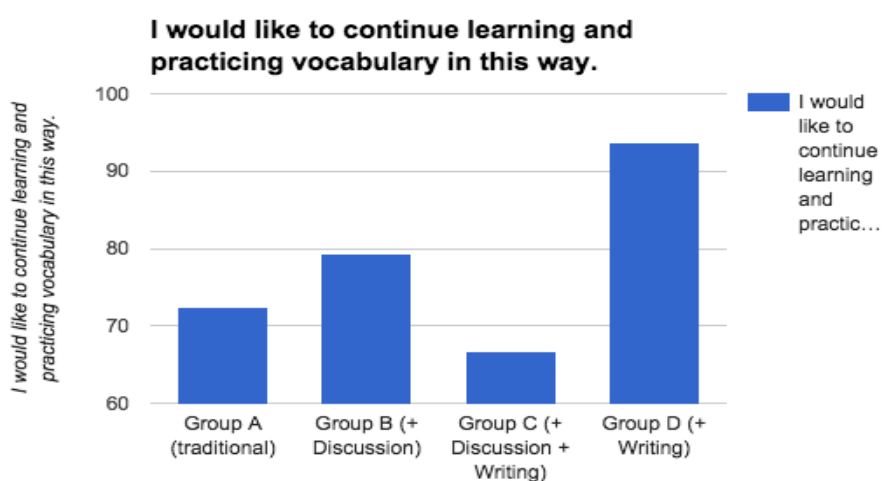
1. I enjoy learning new words.
2. I use a rich vocabulary in my writing.
3. I use a rich vocabulary in my speaking.
4. I make an effort to use new vocabulary words in context (in speaking or in writing)

Students could choose from the following responses: “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” “Strongly Disagree.” From the attitudes survey students took before any vocabulary instruction (in 7<sup>th</sup> grade), I learned that 73% of my students enjoyed learning

new words. 61% of them believed they used a “rich and wide vocabulary” (this was orally described to them as a “many different words, or a variety of interesting words” as they took the survey) in their writing, while only 40.8% of them claimed to use a rich and wide vocabulary in their speaking. I was interested to find that 82% of them reported to trying to use new vocabulary words in context (in their speaking or their writing). While motivation for learning new words was relatively high, and student-reported attempts at utilizing new vocabulary in context was high, students’ own assessment of actually being able to use these words in speech and writing was lower. This made me wonder, what is it about the speaking and writing process that holds students back from utilizing the words that they know or feeling confident about usage in context?

**Attitudes Survey (post-test).** At the end of the treatments, students took a similar survey to the one they took before the vocabulary program, but following two questions were added on to the end for the post-test:

5. The vocabulary activities we did in class were helpful for me.
6. I would like to continue learning and practicing vocabulary in this way.



*Figure 6: Student preferences for vocabulary treatments*

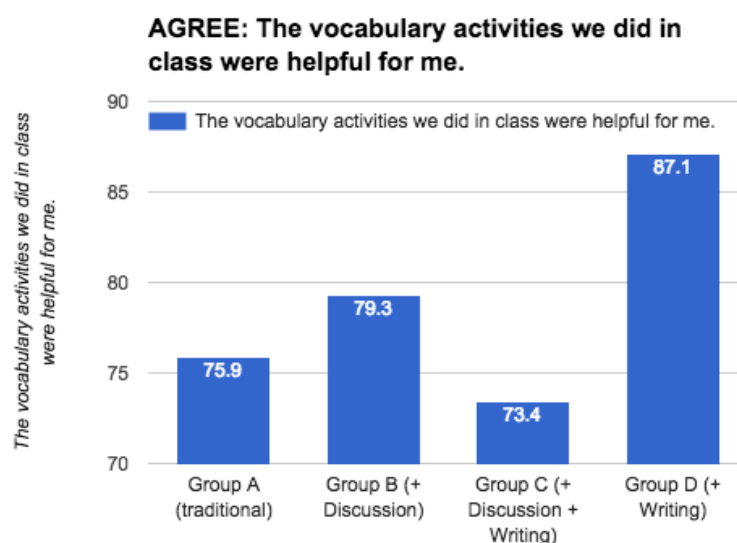
Students in Group A, undergoing only the traditional workbook instruction, showed a slight increase enjoyment of words and believing they have a rich vocabulary in speaking; they also showed a significant increase in believing they have a rich vocabulary in writing. However, they showed decrease in their positive responses when asked if they make an effort to use vocabulary words in context. 72% of students in this group responded that they would like to continue practicing vocabulary with only the workbooks. However, when the class went over the questions to this survey, one student remarked, “Did other classes have to do MORE work? I don’t want to do any *more* work...” This made me wonder if students were seeing additional and varied strategies as solely additional work, rather than further opportunities for deeper or more engaging learning.

The levels of students receiving discussion practice (Group B) in terms of effort to use words and enjoyment in word learning stayed mostly the same, but there was a significant decrease in the percentage of students believing they used a rich and wide vocabulary in their speaking or their writing. Did this group of students gain this new perspective after going through the speaking activities and attempting to use the new vocabulary in their writing, and when, discovering it was actually difficult for them, realize that their expressive vocabulary is not as rich as they would hope? These results, as well, left me with several questions. However, almost 80% of them reported that the vocabulary activities were helpful for them and they would like to continue learning vocabulary using discussion prompts.



Students participating in the discussion and the writing practice (Group C) responded more positively than the pre-assessment in almost all of the categories. While there was minimal growth in positive response when they were asked about using a rich and wide vocabulary in speaking, 12% responded more positively about using a rich and wide vocabulary in their writing.

The group receiving only the writing practice (Group D) showed the most significant change. More students responded positively to every question, ranging from a 7% to 23% in increases. The most marked increases were for using rich vocabulary in speech (despite not practicing using the vocabulary words in speech during class) and overall enjoyment of learning new words. 93.6% responded that they would like to continue learning words with this writing prompts on a weekly basis.



*Figure 7: Student perceptions of the helpfulness of vocabulary activities*

Students receiving discussion-based vocabulary strategies along with their workbook exercises did not report higher levels of enjoyment with word learning than the

group without discussion-based activities. However, the two groups receiving writing-focused treatments grew in their positive responses significantly. Group C (receiving both discussion and writing focused treatment) made a 9% gain in the amount of students who reported enjoyment of learning vocabulary, and Group D (receiving writing focused treatment) made a 13% gain in their positive response.

In terms of making an effort to use new vocabulary in context, more students receiving only traditional instruction (Group A) responded negatively, saying that they do not make an effort to use new words in context (in speaking or in writing); this group dropped 13% from their initial response. 4% of students participating in both writing and discussion activities (Group C) responded less positively than they responded before the treatment, as well. Students receiving the discussion-based treatments (Group B) did not show any significant change in their response after the treatment. However, almost 10% of the students receiving a writing-focused instructional treatment responded more positively after receiving the treatment.

**Vocabulary Attitudes Questionnaire.** As I evaluated and analyzed the data from the attitudes survey, I was disconcerted by the inconsistent patterns across group responses. Why didn't one method make a clear-cut difference in both attitudes and achievement? Why did the class with the most variety and activity in their vocabulary instruction express such a low desire to keep learning in this way? I realized that, while I may still be left with these questions, I hadn't provided an open opportunity for individual student voices; I hadn't given them the opportunity to add individual meaning to their responses. Their own personal take and explanation of their learning processes

was still largely unexplored. I gave my students one more short questionnaire, but this time, it was open-ended. I asked the students the following questions:

1. What motivates you to use new vocabulary in your writing or your speaking?
2. What keeps you from using new vocabulary in your writing or your speaking?
3. What types of in-class activities or practice help you in learning new vocabulary and using it in your writing?

I noticed several themes in this data. First, many students said that the reason they want to use new vocabulary in their writing was to sound “smart,” “mature,” “professional” and “educated.” The perceptions of others (including peers, family members and teachers) were highly important to these students, confirming several past research studies (Graves, 1986); one student remarked how using better diction positively influences “what people think of you.” Many of them reported to having a desire to impress others with their knowledge and language abilities. Only some of them mentioned more conceptual reasons. For example, one student said he was motivated to learn new vocabulary if, “the words give meaning to what’s in [his] life.” An even smaller number related the learning and using of new vocabulary to the receptive skills, like understanding the complex vocabulary of others.

Students had various ideas when it came to thinking through the obstacles that kept them from utilizing new vocabulary. Many said they just forgot about the words, others confessed to not taking the time to really think about better diction as they wrote, saying it was “easier to use old/easy words.” However, fear or insecurity about word usage stood out as a major theme throughout responses. One student responded to the question of what kept her from using new words in her writing, answering that “the fear of not knowing what word to use or not knowing what a word means when I am writing

something, because I don't want to be using a word that I think means one thing but really means something else.” A few students confirmed Werderich & Armstrong’s (2013) research, emphasizing that they needed more feedback on whether or not usage was accurate when they used it in speech and writing. Other outstanding themes in responses were students feeling like they did not know the definition well enough, not knowing the pronunciation of words (Fischer & Frey, 2011), or not knowing the spellings of words.

When students were asked about what tools helped them integrate words into their writing, only 18% of the total number of respondents brought up the vocabulary workbook as a helpful tool. However, 38.5% of respondents specifically mentioned activities that were part of the vocabulary treatments applied in this study. In breaking down the responses by group, students who participated in the discussion-based vocabulary treatment responded much more positively in regards the strategies when given an open-ended option than when we did the attitudes post-assessment. In fact, the students in highest portion of students in this group mentioned the specific activities from the vocabulary treatment (for them, it was discussion-based activities) than any of the other groups.

Table 4:

*Percentage of students naming treatment strategies as helpful in writing*

	Group A (traditional workbook)	Group B (discussion)	Group C (discussion/writing)	Group D (writing)
% mentioning activities in applied treatment	33%	55%	43%	40%

Besides using the specific strategies in the treatments or listing the workbook, almost the entire remaining percentage of students responded that games such as Kahoot, Quizlet Live or other competitive games helped them learn vocabulary. Yet, these games students listed are often most adaptable to term and definition memorization rather than authentic understanding and practice of a given word in context. As I moved forward with the tests in the unit, I began to wonder about student reliance on a given definition, and if they truly knew the word or if they had simply memorized the single definition from the workbook.

**An Intriguing Mistake.** A mistake I made with one of the tests allowed me to deeper explore this question of terms and limited definitions. When I created the tests, I based the terms and definitions on the prior year's version of the Prestwick House (Osborne, 2008) vocabulary workbook. During the second unit test, something took me by surprise. Many students came to me when I first handed out the test, stating that the correct definition for the term *exponential* was not in the options list. The definition from the book was, in fact, one of the multiple choice options: it was "great in number or size." However, textbook editors made a revision to the new textbook between the time that I created the tests (the summer of 2016) and when students received the new copies of their workbooks (the Fall of 2016). In this revision, editors changed the definition of "*exponential*" to "steadily increasing; growing," which is a more accurate definition. In response to their confusion, I told students to choose the "best answer" out of the options. One of the options I had written in the choices was an intentional antonym. The antonym was "steadily decreasing; lessening." When I looked at student responses, many students chose the antonym rather than the "best answer" available to them. Although students in

Groups B and C had discussed this word and practiced using it in context during the week, 75% of Group B (utilizing discussion based strategies) chose the antonym as the correct answer, the highest percentage of all four groups. This realization made me pause. Students seemed drawn to the antonym because the word structure was similar to the definition they memorized. Were students too reliant on one sole definition of a word? When students previously discussed the word, were they hearing classmates misuse the word, and therefore, second-guessing correct usage or meaning on the assessment? This observation seemed to resonate with Sedita's (2005) conclusions that students need to work with synonyms of the word and accessible definitions to truly gain deeper and more lasting understanding.

## **Conclusion**

This data was collected in efforts to answer the question, *How does social interaction in vocabulary instruction impact student vocabulary understanding and usage in writing?* The data suggested that when students utilize new vocabulary words in speaking prior to an assessment, they make greater gains both in lexical knowledge of the words and semantic knowledge of the words than peers not engaging in the same speaking activities. Students also report higher levels of enjoyment for learning words this way and believing that these methods are helpful. Chapter 4 discussed the results and themes that emerged from the quantitative data collected (unit tests) and qualitative data (attitudes surveys and questionnaires), as well as identifying which areas of prior research were confirmed or contradicted through this research study. Although this study provided several helpful insights in terms of student vocabulary usage in writing, it also triggered

several questions. In chapter 5, I reflect on my own growth as a researcher, the significant learning of my research, implications of the research and limitations within the study.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusions

#### Introduction

Chapter 5 of this Capstone reflects upon the question, *How does social interaction in vocabulary instruction impact student vocabulary understanding and usage in writing?* Based on the research I conducted, I concluded that student comprehension and utilization of new vocabulary in writing improves with the use of discussion surrounding the new terms. However, the extent of this positive impact seems limited; student gains were more significant when vocabulary activities allowed students to practice writing in the terms in context prior to the assessment. The previous chapter summarized and interpreted data from this research study. This chapter will explore my own growth and development over the course of this research study, the areas within my data and study that surprised me, confused me and caused me to ask deeper questions, and themes from the literature review that emerged during my study. Lastly, I will discuss the long-term implications of this research, my next steps as a researcher and educator, and suggestions for further study.

#### Learning and Growth

This intensive process of this capstone challenged me as an individual and researcher, and I have undergone significant growth throughout the process. Although I teach the research process in my English Language Arts classroom, I am reminded that it can truly be a daunting endeavor and a genuine challenge for learners at every level. The process is messy, unpredictable and multi-faceted; it required perseverance, critical



thinking and a growth mindset in innumerable ways. The process demanded that I step outside my comfort zone and that I face skills and tasks that I so often label as “not my forte” with confidence and a willingness to keep moving through the discomfort.

First, this process challenged me as a researcher. As an ELA teacher (and an individual), I embrace the creative process, the abstract thinking, stories and anecdotes, ideation and questioning. I am not afraid of messy. I am highly reflective, and am constantly asking myself questions about my teaching, my students’ progress, why something might have happened, and how to grow or improve in my practice.

Throughout this process, especially nearing the end, I could see how this habit of reflection and questioning could spur me on to further research. It also challenged me to take a step back and think about how I could actually find answers to my questions; even further, caused me to consider whether the answers that I find (or assume, at times) are actually reliable. Altogether, developing a scientific process, full of forethought, details, planning and calculation forced me to slow down. I had to exercise a great deal of organization and learn how to think like a researcher. I often shy away from numbers and calculations; in this study, I had to work with them, learn them, and understand them. I often tell my students to keep a growth mindset in the face of discomfort, and to see areas where they have failed before as opportunities to learn and improve. I had to preach this to myself repeatedly through the data analysis component. I grew in my ability to see and manage details and to interpret hard data, especially when it did not give me the answers I wanted or expected.

This process also pushed me as a teacher. It has challenged me to think about how I can be certain that my students are making gains, and if the instructional methods I use

in the classroom are actually effective. I often tend to rely on my own sense of whether or not the methods I am using work for my students; I do use formative data to inform my decisions, and I frequently reflect on summative data, as well. However, this capstone process has taught me just that– a *process* for questioning, formulating a plan or response, and then looking deeply into the data.

The areas where I found that I was missing something in my findings reminded me to seek out student feedback about their own learning, and to take actions that are responsive rather than reactive. Furthermore, as I journeyed through this process, crafting my own paper, I realized how powerful exemplars of quality work can be for students. In this case, I was student, teacher and researcher, and the examples I found helped me understand the process and outcomes more accurately. This is also true of vocabulary usage and writing, prompting me as a teacher to provide my students with a multitude of examples – examples of style, diction, vocabulary in context and rich language.

Although this process was daunting, overwhelming and all consuming at times, all of my study on vocabulary and writing birthed a further passion for authentic vocabulary instruction and practice in my classroom. Reviewing the literature on vocabulary greatly impacted my view of effective vocabulary instruction and my passion to spark student motivation with diction in writing.

### **Literature Review**

In reviewing the literature prior to my own research, studies showed a gap in how student discussion around vocabulary could impact their usage in writing. While some studies existed that showed a positive impact (Duin and Graves, 1987) others did not show that vocabulary practice with discussion impacted word choice in writing when it

was unprompted (Wolf, 1975). This is ultimately the goal: that students utilize rich, descriptive word choice in their writing without an adult commanding them to use a prescribed set of words. Beyond these examples of past research studies, there was limited research exploring the connection between discussion in vocabulary instruction and its impact on writing. While my findings seemed to affirm Duin and Graves (1987) research that discussion positively impacts usage in writing, it did not show as great of gains as the participants in Duin and Graves (1987) study or as consistent of results. I am left with several questions and ideas for further research into this topic.

After the vocabulary units had concluded, our students did their own research projects and presented their findings. I noticed during their presentations, several students in Group C (students receiving both writing and discussion practice) and a few in Group D (students receiving writing practice) attempted to use vocabulary words from prior units in their oral presentations. Not all of them used the words correctly, but they attempted, and that resonated with me. These students were no longer being required to use these words; their grades were no longer dependent on their usage of them, or their accuracy. Nevertheless, here they were, using the words in context. Was the vocabulary sticking with them for a longer period of time? Did they feel more confident about word usage, and are they now more conscious of the words that they are using in their speech and writing because of the treatments applied? Coyne, McCoach, and Kapp (2007) found that vocabulary instruction that included dialogue between teacher and students produced greater growth gains and children utilizing dialogue and interactive activities “maintained word knowledge for six to eight weeks after instruction” (as cited in Butler et al., 2010).

While this anecdotal evidence may be limited confirmation, it seems to point back to Butler's (2010) conclusions.

### **Implications of the Research**

**Impact on Future Vocabulary Instruction.** After completing this research, I plan to make changes in my own classroom and to bring my findings, along with ideas for next steps, to the English Language Arts department at my school. In the future, I would like to tweak the pretest so that I can consider levels of vocabulary knowledge and knowledge of usage in context, as well as helping students elevate their awareness of their own lexicons. Seeing the number of students who chose to write discrete sentences rather than full paragraphs reminded me of the levels of knowledge developed by Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002). Out of the five levels of vocabulary knowledge, the third level is "Narrow, context bound knowledge, such as knowing that a radiant bride is a beautifully smiling happy one, but unable to describe an individual in a different context as radiant" (p.10). This could have happened on the test; students could have practiced the word in one or two contexts and then regurgitated this on the assessment. Graves (1986) research that some strategies do impact knowledge of definitions, but do very little to support understanding of usage, context, or motivation to use the word; this may have occurred with some of the strategies, but the sentences that students used gave me a limited perspective on how deep they understood a given term.

In the future, I would also like to explore the appropriate amount of time needed to explore new vocabulary in the classroom and foster deep understanding. Graves (2006) suggested that the more time students actively engage in a word, the more they understand it; I didn't find this to be consistently confirmed in my research, but did the

amount of time I spent or the number of words I was teaching play into this discrepancy? Group C spent the most time in vocabulary instruction because they worked through the written journal prompts, the discussion prompts and the vocabulary exercises, yet they did not consistently show a better lexical or semantic understanding of the words.

After this study, I am further convinced that word learning should not stay isolated to vocabulary curriculum, but rather, actions must be taken in the classroom to increase word consciousness (interest and awareness of words) (Sedita, 2005). Word consciousness can be supported through guiding students through vivid descriptions in writing, interesting figurative language in books, play on words, and by allowing students to select their own examples of word choice to save and share with others, similar to the findings of Ruddell and Shearer (2002).

**Emphasis on Feedback.** In the open-response survey students took at the end of the study, several students expressed the desire for increased feedback on word usage, pronunciation and spelling. This affirmed prior research by Coyne, McCoach, and Kapp (2007), which emphasizes that feedback also allows students to retain vocabulary understanding for a more extended period of time. Moving forward, I intend to utilize recommendations by Duin & Graves (1987), and directly teach fewer words, but include more interaction between teacher and students. In addition, I am determined to investigate how can I make students more effective peer writing tutors, helping each other make sense of and elevate their writing (Crouse and Davey, 1989).

**Next Steps.** Moving forward, I plan to utilize more writing practice and authentic discussion surrounding vocabulary words, but incorporate more feedback on usage. I also will continue to revise the way vocabulary usage and diction is pre-assessed and assessed.

Overall, I plan to research and implement strategies, including intentional feedback on diction, which will cultivate word consciousness amongst my students; this word consciousness should saturate our 7<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum, not just the vocabulary curriculum. As a recommendation for myself and other educators, I would suggest that the beginning of the year, teachers spend time analyzing student writing samples (from multiple genres, including persuasive, expository and narrative) to explore student dimensions of vocabulary knowledge and also spend time listening to students read aloud; this allows teachers to gain a firm understanding of student vocabulary knowledge in writing and in speaking, as well as their current practices in word choice.

In addition, I plan to implement Dale & O'Rourke's (1986) 4 levels of word knowledge scale into vocabulary instructional processes with students; this will increase metacognition (thinking about their own thinking) as well metalinguistic awareness (understanding the structure and processes behind language). In this reflective tool, students think about new vocabulary words and rate them on the following scale:

1. I never saw it before
2. I've heard of it, but I don't know what it means
3. I recognize it in context – it has something to do with ...
4. I know it and can use it

A high level of students involved in this study already express a desire to learn new words, more than 76% of students responding that they enjoyed learning new words in the vocabulary attitudes post-assessment. 78% of students stated that they do make an effort to use new vocabulary in writing; however, 66% of them believe that they use a rich and wide vocabulary in their writing. If students are motivated to implement new words in their writing, but a portion of these same student perceive their own abilities in actually doing this to be low, teachers and researchers must act strategically to empower

and equip these students. Teachers should incorporate new ways of exposing students to strong writing and diction. Practice of this skill with feedback also proves vital.

### **Limitations**

While the research conducted in this study points to discussion having some positive impact on student writing, there were (and are) limitations in this study. First, the types of words in the tests may have presented obstacles that made students less likely to use them and more likely to feel less confident in their usage. For example, unit 4 included words like “polytheistic,” “sanctum” and “diefy,” which may not line up with topics that middle level students often write about or speak about.

Another limitation is that I did not pretest the background knowledge with the words in context; I did know where students stood in terms of lexical knowledge of the vocabulary words, but did not know their levels with the words semantically. I thought about this prior to the research, but since the units were starting in the Fall, my students were inundated with other pretests, as well. While I gave them a pretest of all of the vocabulary terms, I decided against given an extensive writing pretest. I wasn’t sure how to implement a pretest that asked students to write each word in a sentence for all 48 words, as this would be too extensive for where they were at in the school year. Now, looking back, I would have used Dale & O’Rourke’s (1986) levels of vocabulary knowledge scale so that students would be able to rate the words on their own; I would have used this same scale in a post-assessment, and then connected the results of the reflective scale to student achievement (perceived capabilities versus actual capabilities).

While I did give a pre-assessment of vocabulary knowledge, the study could not control for all background knowledge of the words, especially since it is likely that the

background knowledge of some students increased incrementally over the course of the study (from their own reading, from other classes and from other sources of exposure). For example, one student reads Greek mythology-based Young Adult literature by popular author Rick Riordan almost exclusively. When given the word list for unit 4, which included terms like “polytheistic,” “deity,” “pantheon” and “sanctum,” this student wrote an elaborate paragraph about life in Ancient Greece. His vocabulary was rich and diverse, using each term correctly. However, his test does not provide truly accurate data on how well the given strategies worked for him on this unit. His background knowledge on these terms was already established (and likely widening) prior to this unit.

Some scoring for the writing components of the test also left me wondering what level a student really was at with a given term. For purposes of the assessment, I explicitly told students to make sure they were showing me that they knew the specific definition of the word when they used it in their writing example. I gave half points when the word was used in the correct context, but it was unclear whether or not the student knew the definition of the word. For example, a few students wrote the example: “My religion is monotheistic.” While the use of the word “monotheistic” is semantically correct, it is unclear whether or not the student has an accurate understanding of the word meaning (especially in its contrast to another vocabulary word this unit: “monotheistic.”). Additionally, I awarded half points when it was clear that the definition was known, but the word form was inaccurate. For example, a student would write, “My friend is Jewish, and is monotheism.” While it is clear that the student understood the definition, the student did not understand the correct suffix for the word. These examples, while giving



me a better understanding of the student's level of knowledge for that term, were sometimes difficult to score.

Beyond the changes already addressed, I could not help but wonder if I would have seen more patterns and come away with clearer conclusions if the study included more unit assessments; three unit assessments were too few to truly draw reliable conclusions. If given the opportunity to try this study again, I would extend the duration of the study, including more unit assessments to give me a clearer view of the patterns emerging. In addition, I would create a more comprehensive pre-assessment, providing me with greater understanding of student semantic knowledge of vocabulary. This would allow me to measure growth in semantic understanding more accurately.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that students participating in this study have all been labeled as "Advanced English Language Arts" students, and based on the above components of selection criteria, learn new vocabulary at a different (more accelerated) rate than struggling learners. These students do not face many of the obstacles other students face in terms of expanding their vocabularies, including having limited knowledge of English, not reading outside of school or having reading disabilities (Sedita, 2005). Many of the students in this study are habitual readers; research shows that students who spend time reading outside of school encounter a significantly higher amount of words in texts than students who rarely read outside of school (Texas Reading Initiative, 2002). The strategies practiced in this study may yield drastically different results if tried in a different context.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

After concluding my research, I am convinced there is still ample room for further research concerning the development of rich diction in student writing. My research could be extended with a study that focused on teaching a limited number of specific words directly related to an upcoming piece of academic writing, and then guiding students through pronunciation and usage of the word with intentional feedback. The researcher could then move forward and study the impact of discussion and feedback on new vocabulary on student writing samples.

As I have reviewed further literature, I have explored the option of using Type-Token Ratio tools (TTR) to measure vocabulary diversity in writing. Further research is needed to deeply analyze student writing and study how the methods utilized in this study could elevate and enrich my student writing outside of vocabulary assessment. There is also further research to be done on the most effective order of vocabulary instructional activities (i.e., does having discussion activities prior to writing activities prove more beneficial, or vice versa?), as well as the efficacy of prescribed vocabulary programs (similar to the textbook used in this study) versus self-selected vocabulary words in enriching diction and complexity in student writing.

## **Conclusions**

In answering the question *How does social interaction in vocabulary instruction impact student vocabulary understanding and usage in writing?* I was able to conclude that social interaction with vocabulary does support writing to a limited extent. While depending on this strategy as a singular means of practice will not result in optimal learning (NICHD, 2000 as cited in Butler et al., 2010) or support student writing in the most effective way, it does belong in vocabulary instruction and in any academic content

where teachers seek to deepen student understanding of essential academic vocabulary.

There was very limited research that explored the connection of social interaction in vocabulary instruction and written expression, and even with this research, more studies are needed to increase and deepen this body of research.

This process has stretched me, molded me and developed me as a researcher, a teacher, a professional and a learner. This is not the end of my exploration of the power of language in the classroom and in the world; instead, it is the beginning of a deeper, more mindful, more grounded venture. As an English Language Arts teacher, and a devout believer in the power of the written word, I believe students need to be equipped with the tools that make them powerful, clear and impacting communicators in our society. The findings of this research have taken me one step further in equipping my students with the right tools. Now, I journey on.

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## APPENDIX A: Example of Unit Assessment

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

## VOCABULARY UNIT 1 WRITTEN ASSESSMENT

## Part I: Define the words

<p><b>1. Agile</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Able to move quickly and lightly</li> <li>b. To fill with energy and strength</li> <li>c. Very precise, clear</li> <li>d. To put forth as true; claim</li> </ul> <p><b>b) Agitate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. To make legal or official</li> <li>b. To publicly demand; petition for; to move vigorously or violently; to upset</li> <li>c. Wasting money or resources</li> <li>d. Strongly opposed to change; conservative</li> </ul> <p><b>c) Allege</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. To put forth as true; claim</li> <li>b. To fill with strength or energy</li> <li>c. Able to move quickly and lightly</li> <li>d. Very precise, clear and accurate</li> </ul> <p><b>d) Enact</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Done with power, force or energy</li> <li>b. Wasting money or resources</li> <li>c. To make legal or official</li> <li>d. To put forth as true, claim</li> </ul> <p><b>e) Energetic</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Strongly opposed to change; conservative</li> <li>b. Able to move quickly and lightly</li> <li>c. To fill with strength or energy</li> <li>d. Intended to decrease discomfort and maximize work</li> </ul> <p><b>f) Ergonomic</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Wasting money or resources</li> <li>b. To fill with strength or energy</li> <li>c. To publicly demand; petition for</li> <li>d. Intended to decrease discomfort and maximize work</li> </ul>	<p><b>1. Invigorate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. To fill with strength and energy</li> <li>b. Strongly opposed to change; conservative</li> <li>c. To publicly demand; petition for</li> <li>d. Very precise; clear, accurate</li> </ul> <p><b>b) Prodigal</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. To put forth as true; claim</li> <li>b. Wasting money or resources</li> <li>c. To make legal or official</li> <li>d. Done with power, force or energy</li> </ul> <p><b>c) Reactionary</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. To fill with strength or energy</li> <li>b. Wasting money or resources</li> <li>c. Strongly opposed to change; conservative</li> <li>d. Intended to decrease discomfort and maximize work</li> </ul> <p><b>d) Surgical</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Very precise; clear and accurate</li> <li>b. To put forth as true; claim</li> <li>c. Able to move quickly and lightly</li> <li>d. To make legal or official</li> </ul> <p><b>e) Vigorous</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Wasting money or resources</li> <li>b. To put forth as true; claim</li> <li>c. To fill with strength and energy</li> <li>d. Able to move quickly and lightly</li> </ul>
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## Appendix B: Example of Teacher Journal

Date	Unit	Observation
11/5	UNIT 1	We started our vocabulary program today. We just did the traditional method. Energy is LOW. I didn't tell students that they could talk, but I didn't tell them that they couldn't. They all completed the exercises on their own, and only one class asked several questions about the words.
Date	Unit	Observation
11/9	Unit 1	<p>Did a review game today (the day before the quiz), and I was alarmed at how few students knew the definitions of the words. I would say the definition, and then the first student to know the matching word would stand up -- it was really about 6-8 students that knew the definitions and were standing up time after time. This is after having 6 days of in-class time to complete the vocabulary exercises. Also wanted to note that even though I gave them permission to work with a partner, most of them just completed the exercises on their own.</p> <p>** After seeing this note, I'm wondering -- did many of them cram for the test??**</p>
Date	Unit	Observation
11/14	UNIT 2	First time through discussion prompts was fun and interesting -- good to hear students vocalize these words -- opportunity to give feedback on pronunciation. Had so many memorable examples shared (personal stories, funny examples, etc.)
Date	Unit	Observation
11/16	Unit 2	<p>Groups C and D did creative writing today. Excitement and engagement were HIGH! Lots of students volunteered to share their writing. Not all volunteers correctly used the words, and it gave me a chance to give them feedback.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group B had discussion prompts again. They discuss the words easily, but are a bit more hesitant to share their verbal examples.</li> <li>• Group A did their workbooks... so quiet. Energy is low, but they are focused. Interested to see how this translates.</li> </ul>

## Appendix C: Pre-Vocabulary Survey

**Pre Vocabulary Attitudes Survey**

1. Last name:

2. First name:

3. Class Period:

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Period 1  
☐ Period 2  
☐ Period 3  
☐ Period 4  
☐ Period 5  
☐ Period 6  
☐ Period 7

4. I enjoy learning new words.

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Strongly Agree  
☐ Agree  
☐ Disagree  
☐ Strongly Disagree

5. I use a rich and wide vocabulary in my writing.

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Strongly Agree  
☐ Agree  
☐ Disagree  
☐ Strongly Disagree



18/2016

Pre Vocabulary Attitudes Survey

**6. I use a rich and wide vocabulary in my writing.***Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

**7. I use a rich and wide vocabulary in my speaking.***Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

**8. I make an effort to use new vocabulary words in context (in speaking or in writing).***Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

## Appendix D: Vocabulary Attitudes Post-Assessment

**Vocab post-assessment: Speaking and Writing****\* Required**

1. What is your last name: \*

---

2. What is your first name: \*

3. What is your class period: \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Period 1  
☐ Period 2  
☐ Period 3  
☐ Period 4  
☐ Period 5  
☐ Period 6  
☐ Period 7

4. I enjoy learning new words.

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Strongly disagree  
☐ Disagree  
☐ Agree  
☐ Strongly Agree

5. I use a rich and wide vocabulary in my writing.

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Strongly disagree  
☐ Disagree  
☐ Agree  
☐ Strongly Agree

Vocab post-assessment: Speaking and Writing

**6. I use a rich and wide vocabulary in my speaking.**

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

**7. I make an effort to use new vocabulary words in context (in speaking or in writing)**

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

**8. The vocabulary activities we did in class were helpful for me.**

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

**9. I would like to continue learning and practicing vocabulary in this way.**

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

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## Appendix E: Vocabulary Survey Post-Questionnaire

**Vocab and Learning Questionnaire**

1. First and Last name

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2. Class period

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ P1

☐ P5

☐ P6

☐ p7

3. What motivates you to use new vocabulary in your writing or your speaking?

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4. What keeps you from using new vocabulary in your writing or your speaking?

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5. What types of in-class activities or practice help you in learning new vocabulary and using it in writing?

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## Appendix F: Example of Conversation and Journal Prompts

Vocabulary Unit	Words Assessed	Root words	Conversation Prompts	Writing Practice Prompts	Writing assessment prompts
2	Composure Exponential Hypothesis Imposition Inconstant Instantaneous Parenthetical Reinstate Repository synthesize	Pos, pon Stan, stat Thes, thet	<p>* Describe a <b>hypothesis</b> you tested in science class or at home.</p> <p>* Talk about a time you saw something grow <b>exponentially</b> (a problem, your money, a crowd, your chores, a collection)</p> <p>* Talk about a time when you had trouble maintaining your <b>composure</b>.</p> <p>* Talk about a time when you were going to do something, but were faced with an unexpected <b>imposition</b>.</p> <p>* What do you collect? What would be an appropriate <b>repository</b> for your collection?</p> <p>* What is an example of a decision you would not want to make <b>instantaneously</b>?</p> <p>* Imagine there were no rules at school. Which do you think would be the first few to be <b>reinstated</b>?</p> <p>* What are the pros and cons of being <b>inconstant</b>?</p> <p>* What flavors are best <b>synthesized</b>? What personalities make a bad synthesis?</p> <p>* I'll use a <b>parenthetical</b> statement to describe my mom. My mom, who is the mother of 9 children, is a very patient woman. Use a <b>parenthetical</b> statement as you describe something about yourself or a family member.</p>	<p>Picture prompt. Use the following three vocabulary words to describe what's happening in the picture: <b>composure, instantaneously, parenthetical.</b></p>	<p>* Describe a time or tell a story about a science experiment gone wrong. Use at least 5 of your vocabulary words in your story.</p> <p>* Tell an original story using at least 5 of your vocabulary words.</p>

## Appendix G: Vocabulary Weekly Schedule

**Capstone Study: Vocabulary Schedule in 7th Grade ADV ELA**

	<b>Group A</b> (workbook/traditional)	<b>Group B</b> (wb+discussion)	<b>Group C</b> (wb+discussion, writing)	<b>Group D</b> (wb+writing)
Day 1	Read words and definitions aloud  Exercise 1	Read words and definitions aloud  -Interactive questions about some words during the definitions (whole group)  Exercise 1	Read words and definitions aloud  - Interactive questions about some words during the definitions (whole group)  Exercise 1	Read words and definitions aloud  Exercise 1
Day 2	Exercise 2	Discussion prompts (pairs), exercise 2	Conversation prompts (pairs),	Exercise 2
Day 3	Exercise 3	Exercise 3 (talk through with partner)	Exercise 3 & 4 (talk through with partner)	Exercise 3 & 4
Day 4	Exercise 4	Exercise 4, discussion prompt (pairs)	creative writing prompt	creative writing prompt
Day 5	Exercise 5	Exercise 5 (talk through with partner)	Exercise 5 (talk through with partner)	Exercise 5
Day 6	Exercise 6	Exercise 6, discussion prompt	Exercise 6, discussion prompt	Exercise 6
Day 7	Study with partner	Discussion review (whole group)	Discussion review, white board sentences	white board sentences/Journal prompt
Day 8	Quiz	Quiz	Quiz	Quiz

## Appendix H: Letter to the Principal

Dear Principal,

This upcoming school year, I am working with the Hamline University Master of Arts in Education program to conduct an action research project at \*\*\*\*\*. This research project explores best methods to improve student vocabulary in writing. I will be implementing 4 different vocabulary treatments to specifically test if social interaction (conversation using new vocabulary words) has an impact on vocabulary understanding and usage in writing.

With your permission, I will conduct a different “vocabulary instructional treatment” on each of my 4 Advanced English Language Arts classes. The treatments are as follows:

1. Traditional Vocabulary Instruction (control group)
2. Vocabulary Instruction with social interaction
3. Vocabulary Instruction with social interaction and writing practice
4. Vocabulary Instruction with writing practice

I will test the vocabulary treatment for approximately 6 weeks, and then implement the system that proves to be most effective for all students moving forward, to ensure equity. Vocabulary test data, along with a pre and post vocabulary attitudes survey, will be used to measure the efficacy of each treatment.

Student’s participation in this study is completely voluntary and parents and guardians will be contacted to explain the study as well as gain permission. All information will be kept completely confidential; all identifying information about students and \*\*\*\*\*’s name will not be used in the study.

Please share any concerns, questions or thoughts about this study with me. I am glad to explain my methodology and plans with you.

Sincerely,

Liz Swenson

## APPENDIX I: Parent/Guardian Letter of Consent

Hello parents and families of Ms. Swenson's 7th grade Advanced ELA class,

This year, I am excited to share with you that I am conducting research with Hamline University Master of Arts in Education program. This action research project will explore what vocabulary instructional methods are most effective in helping students use new vocabulary in writing.

Although ALL students will still be using the Prestwick House Greek and Latin vocabulary curriculum (which we have used for several years), 3 groups will receive modified instructional practices and activities along with the workbook exercises. There will be four different treatments I will apply to each Language Arts class. They are as follows:

1. Traditional Vocabulary Instruction (the same instruction that has historically taken place in 7th grade Advanced ELA)
2. Vocabulary Instruction with conversation prompts (social interaction)
3. Vocabulary Instruction with social interaction and writing practice
4. Vocabulary Instruction with writing practice

I will test the vocabulary treatment for approximately 6 weeks (4 vocabulary units). After the first four units, I will then implement the system that proves to be most effective for all students moving forward, to ensure equity. Vocabulary test data, along with a pre and post vocabulary attitudes survey, will be used to measure the efficacy of each treatment.

Student's participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you prefer to opt out of the study, your child will only participate in traditional vocabulary instruction for the first 4 units of our vocabulary program. All information will be kept completely confidential; student names, identifying information and the name of our school will be changed to protect confidentiality.

If you have questions or concerns, please contact me. I'm happy to talk more with you about my methods and research.

Sincerely,

Liz Swenson

\_\_\_\_\_ My child, \_\_\_\_\_, has permission to participate in this action research study.



\_\_\_\_\_ I do not wish to have my child participate in this study; I wish to have my child only participate in the traditional vocabulary program.

#### Appendix J: Vocabulary Words Used

	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
Words	Agile Agitate Allege Enact Energetic Ergonomic Invigorate Prodigal Reactionary Surgical Vigorous	Composure Exponential Hypothesis Imposition Inconstant Instantaneous Parenthetical Reinstate Repository Synthesize	Anticipate Cohabitation Conceive Condone Deceptive Exhibit Donor Editorial Intercept Nontraditional Participant Exceptional	Castigate Chastened Chastise Deify Deity Monotheism Pantheon Polytheistic Sanctify Sanctions Sanctuary Sanctum
Roots	Erg, Urg Vig Ig, ag, act, eg	Pos, Pon Stan, stat Thes, thet	Cept/Cieve/Cip Hab/Hib Dit/don	Dei Sanct Cast/Chast The